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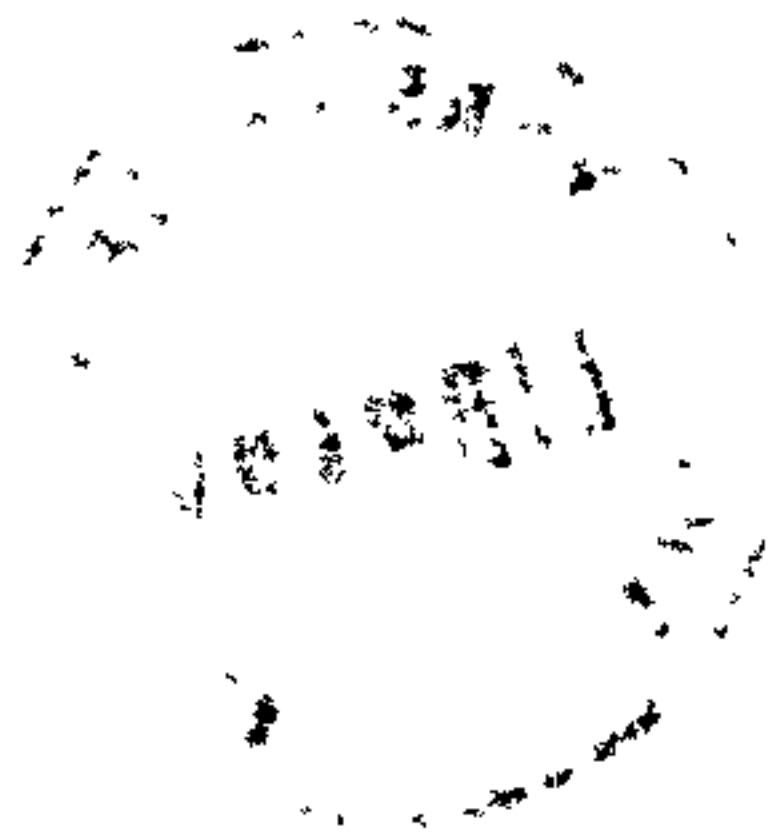
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HUMOUR IN THE NOVEL 1800-1850: THE MORAL
VISION AND THE AUTONOMOUS IMAGINATION

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SUMMARY

This thesis attempts to trace the development of two kinds of humorous sensibility in the fiction of the period 1800-1850, and to analyse the tensions between them. Humour as inherited from the eighteenth century contained diverse and sometimes contradictory elements which were strongly developed in the Romantic period, so nineteenth century humour could recommend an ideal individual morality, express social optimism, and hold out the hope of social reconciliation; yet at the same time it could subversively celebrate individual autonomy at the expense of social and moral concerns, and transform reality through ironic perspectives or grotesque forms. Edgeworth used the humorous character for didactic social purposes in her Irish novels; Scott, however, made his humorous characters the main imaginative embodiments of the social themes of his Scottish novels, maintaining a balance between didactic function and individual idiosyncrasy, a balance sustained by Galt in his novels about local history. But sceptical tendencies appeared: Austen warned that the humorous character was a threat to social order; Peacock's humorous characters were finally overwhelmed by a rancorous satirical spirit; and in Don Juan, Byron used a version of Romantic Irony to undermine moral assertion. Romantic theories of humour were untouched by any taint of scepticism; such theories stressed the moral function of the humorous sensibility, seeing it as

a genial and reconciling force based on love for mankind (the subversive power of the grotesque mode was viewed with suspicion); and Sartor Resartus embodied the highest moral and metaphysical possibilities of the humorous imagination. Beyond this, however, Thackeray's development of ironical perspectives further undermined humour's positive and optimistic tendencies; and in Dickens's early novels there is a profound tension between the moral and social tendencies of the humour, and the increasingly anarchic, grotesque directions it takes. Eliot rejected the egotistical, ironic and grotesque possibilities of humour, instead seeing moral improvement and social reconciliation as a matter of coming to terms with unattractive reality.

INTRODUCTION

1

In January 1800, Maria Edgeworth published her first novel, Castle Rackrent, a tale of Irish life. It is not a typical work; seen in the context of her subsequent Irish novels --: Ennui (1809), The Absentee (1812), and Ormond (1817):-- it is an eccentric aberration, a brilliant and original experiment which she never repeated; but it is of far greater significance in the story of the development of humorous fiction than are her later, more conventional, Irish novels. In the later novels, the humorous characters are relegated to the periphery of the action; but in Castle Rackrent, a humorous character is at the centre of the novel, narrating the events. These events, the lives of four generations of the Rackrent family, are expounded, in terms of his own idiosyncratic awareness of their significance, by Thady Quirk, the endearing, exasperating, and irrational family retainer. Thady is a great humorous character, fully the equal, in imaginative vitality, of the great humorous characters of Scott or Dickens; and it is through the manipulation of his fluid consciousness that Edgeworth creates a humorous world which is also a social history.

But the very brilliance of Thady's presentation became a barrier to the correct interpretation of

the novel. He was too endearing, and the humorous world which he created was too convincing, for the realisation of the didactic intention which lay behind the novel. So vividly engaging was the humorous realisation of the conception, that the novel was taken as a sympathetic portrait of the Ireland of modern times, instead of as a satirical exposure of the corrupt customs and manners of a bygone period; and Thady's comical partiality for the family was not sufficiently appreciated as a criticism of the stupid illogicality of the ignorant peasant mind.¹ So, in her subsequent Irish novels, Edgeworth ensured that her didactic intentions were not misinterpreted again, by being swamped in the flood of the humorous imagination. In Ennui and The Absentee, the humorous characters are a minor element in the total picture, strictly controlled by the overriding didactic intention, serving their function in pointing unequivocally their part of the moral theme about Irish society which Edgeworth wishes to illustrate; and although in the first half of Ormond the humorous characters are more predominant, their didactic function is made very clear, with a consequent reduction of spontaneous vitality. In Castle Rackrent, Edgeworth had given free rein to an autonomous humorous imagination, and with disastrous results; in her other Irish novels, it is the moral and didactic imagination which firmly controls the humorous dimension.

¹ Marilyn Butler, Maria Edgeworth (1972), pp. 358-60. Publications cited in the footnotes are published in London, unless otherwise stated.

Although it was a jeu d'esprit, written without the collaboration of her father, the embarrassing consequences of Edgeworth's first fictional attempt to depict Irish life pose a general question about the development of the humorous sensibility in the first half of the nineteenth century, a question which lies at the centre of this discussion: to what extent can the claims of the humorous imagination be accommodated to the claims of a moral and didactic vision? In their theoretical pronouncements about the nature and function of humour, Romantic writers unanimously and unequivocally stress its moral character: man is reconciled with man by the warm glow of the humorous sensibility. In much of their practice, too, humorous writers of the first half of the nineteenth century displayed the operation of the kind of humorous sensibility shown by Fielding or Sterne, in their development of the character of the amiable foible, whose natural goodness of feeling is a moral example to the reader; and one such writer is Scott.

Castle Rackrent looks forward to Scott's more ambitious attempts, in his novels which deal with the history of Scottish society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to investigate, on the basis of rationalist principles, the workings of a whole society. Unlike their eighteenth century predecessors, Edgeworth and Scott created a dense social context in which their characters move and whose tensions they embody; a development which

links them to Shakespeare and to the Romantic novelists of the future. But these crises and tensions at the centre of Scott's moral vision of how society works are most vividly embodied in his humorous characters, not in Edgeworth's post-Castle Rackrent, simple, illustrative fashion, but in imaginative terms which stand comparison with, and revert to, Shakespeare's integrated treatment of his minor and major comic characters, especially Falstaff. Far from finding the creation of humorous characters an embarrassing hindrance to the expression of his most serious moral and social ideas, Scott shows, in his Scottish novels, that it is through the humorous characters that such a seriousness of purpose can be expressed; and there is in Scott a perfect balance between the exploration of the individual idiosyncrasy of the humorous character and the expression through that character of a moral social vision. But this balance was not achieved by later, Romantic, writers, in whose work there is a tension between humour's power to bring out singularity and to transform reality, and its moral and social purpose; and this is a feature which Castle Rackrent also, by accident, anticipates.

As an anticipation of Romantic humorists' work, Castle Rackrent is far more original than anything which Scott attempted. In her novel, Edgeworth not only creates a humorous character; she creates a humorous world, a world which is unified by the overall mood created by the humorous sensibility as

it modulates between the comic and the pathetic modes, looking forward to attempts by Romantic writers to unify their work by means of a complex and modulating humorous tone. In this, Edgeworth had been anticipated in her turn by Tristram Shandy, a proto-Romantic work in which the claims of chronology are denied, and the unity of the work is entirely a matter of control of modulation and transition within an overall tone; and the conception of a unifying, dynamic, oscillating humorous tone is behind such Romantic works as Don Juan, Sartor Resartus, The Old Curiosity Shop, and Vanity Fair.

It was, however, partly through the manipulation of such a tone that the Romantics rediscovered the subversive possibilities of sceptical, ironic, anarchic, and grotesque humour; of the four works listed above, only Sartor Resartus is completely controlled by a fundamental belief in the moral power and social possibilities of humour. This rediscovery is most importantly manifested in the humorous tensions of Dickens's early novels. In these novels, Dickens brings, and was universally praised for bringing, to their full development the moral tendencies of eighteenth century humour, in the sympathetic rendering of anti-social eccentrics, and in the belief in the power of humour to aid social reconciliation between the classes; but alongside these consolidations there runs an increasing tendency to undermine the assumptions of the moral humorous sensibility by creating and celebrating subversive and destructive

egotisms and by seeing reality in terms of a savagely grotesque spectacle. In the ambivalent treatment of Fagin, Squeers, Quilp, and Pecksniff, there is let loose the kind of comic anarchy which is far more threatening to moral and social order than anything envisaged by Austen in her warnings about the consequences of promoting individual idiosyncrasy at the expense of qualities necessary for the conducting of a rational social life; but in Dickens's treatment of characters who disturb such an order, a joyous celebration of their energy overwhelms any satirical impulse which may have originally guided their creation. In Dickens's early novels, the final development of the autonomous humorous imagination is signalled, too; and Eliot, like Austen, but for different reasons, could only turn away from such a vision of the individual and social reality.

2

An interest in humorous characters, or in characters in general, has not been a predominant feature in the writings of modern critics of the novel. For most ordinary readers, a novel is enjoyable mainly because of its characters; and the enjoyment of creating, and living with, characters was a feeling admitted to by many novelists of the nineteenth century; the emotional agonies of killing off Little Nell and Mrs Proudie

as profoundly affected their creators as would the death of a real person. Scott, Dickens, and Trollope were among the novelists who confessed to a relish for their characters' company; the locus classicus of such a feeling is in Trollope's Autobiography, in which Trollope states that the novelist

desires to make his readers so intimately acquainted with his characters that the creations of his brain should be to them speaking, moving, living, human creatures. This he can never do unless he know those fictitious personages himself, and he can never know them well unless he can live with them in the full reality of established intimacy. They must be with him as he lies down to sleep, and as he wakes from his dreams. He must learn to hate them and to love them. He must argue with them, quarrel with them, forgive them, and even submit to them... 2

The reasons for the decline of interest, by many novelists after James, in the creation of character in the sense in which Scott and Dickens and Trollope understood the process, and the subsequent decline of interest in character by critics of the novel, and their preference for discussing such matters as symbolism, verbal patterns, narrative techniques, and moral significance, are set out succinctly by W.J. Harvey in his Character and the Novel (1965).³

² Anthony Trollope, An Autobiography (1883, Fontana Library Edition, 1962), p. 188.

³ Appendix 1, 'The Retreat from Character', pp. 191 - 205.

This book and John Bayley's The Characters of Love (1960) are almost alone among recent discussions of the novel in their interest in the subject of character.⁴

It was often the comic characters whom nineteenth century novelists singled out for comment; and the ordinary reader may well agree that the really memorable characters in the novels of Fielding, Scott, and Dickens, the characters who possess the most highly charged kind of imaginative life, are not the eponymous and official heroes of Joseph Andrews, Waverley, or Nicholas Nickleby, but are Parson Adams, Baron Bradwardine, and Mr Squeers. These characters are part of a great tradition of comic characterisation which covers a period of two and a half centuries. The humorous achievement of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Molière leads on to the great humorous characters of the eighteenth century -: Sir Roger de Coverley, Parson Adams, Doctor Primrose, Uncle Toby, and Matthew Bramble:- themselves the ancestors of Thady Quirk, Bailie Jarvie, Galt's Provost Pawkie, Surtees's Jorrocks, and the supreme comic creations of Dickens: Sam

⁴ More typical of recent approaches to the novel are Wayne C. Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction (University of Chicago Press, 1961), which examines narrative techniques, David Lodge's Language of Fiction (1966), which applies close verbal criticism to selected novels, and Frank Kermode's The Sense of an Ending (1967), which relates fictions to patterns of apocalyptic thought.

Weller, Quilp, Mrs Gamp, and Mr Micawber. The ordinary reader's feeling is, on the face of it, an odd one, however, since, if there is a persistent notion which runs through discussions of the comic character, it is that this character is a type.

In one of his few brief remarks about comedy in his Poetics, Aristotle suggested that comic characters are stereotypes;⁵ Fielding claimed, in discussing his methods, that 'I describe not Men, but Manners; not an Individual, but a Species.... The Lawyer is not only alive, but hath been so these 4000 Years';⁶ and John Forster compared Fielding with Dickens on the ground that each novelist brings people into contact when they touch at their extremes, in an art of characterisation which combines vivid traits with 'propensities common to all mankind'.⁷ The most famous modern statement of this doctrine came from E.M.Forster in 1927;⁸ and a more rigorous method of bringing out the typicality of comic characters is pursued in the approach of Professor

⁵ Aristotle on the Art of Fiction; An English Translation of Aristotle's Poetics by L.J.Potts (1953, Paperback Edition, 1968), p.29.

⁶ Joseph Andrews (1742), edited by Martin C.Battestin (1967), Book 3, Ch.1, p.189. All further references to Joseph Andrews are to this edition.

⁷ The Life of Charles Dickens (1871-3), edited by J.W.T. Ley (1928), Book 9, Ch.1, p.722. All further references to Forster's Life of Dickens are to this edition.

⁸ Aspects of the Novel (1927, Pocket Edition, 1949), p.65.

Northrop Frye, who traces such comic types as the boaster (alazon), the ironist (eiron), the wit (eutrapelos), and the boor (agriokos), from their origins in Greek drama through the comedy of different periods,⁹ and a similarly schematic cataloguing of types is applied to the characters of Dickens in another essay.¹⁰

Perhaps the most extended, and the most interesting, treatment of the comic character as a type is to be found in Bergson's essay of 1900, 'Laughter'.

Bergson builds his theory of the nature of the comic character upon the basis of another theory, about the psychological origins of laughter, which states that laughter arises from our apprehension of 'something mechanical encrusted on the living'.¹¹ This formula is in turn explained in terms of an evolutionist theory of human development; since life is a process which is changing, irreversible, and individual, the comic is what contradicts this process, in the forms of the predominance of the rigid over the vital in human behaviour shown in the repetition, in a mechanical fashion, of gestures, actions, and phrases; the comic character is thus an amalgam of rigidity,

⁹ 'The Mythos of Spring-Comedy', in Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 163-186.

¹⁰ 'Dickens and the Comedy of Humours' (1967), in The Stubborn Structure (1970), pp. 218-240.

¹¹ 'Laughter' (1900), in Comedy, edited by Wylie Sypher (Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), I, v, p. 84.

automism, absentmindedness and unsociability.

Moreover, the purpose of laughter is, according to Bergson, closely connected with the notion that the

comic character is a type. Comedy is 'the only one of all the arts that aims at the general',¹²

since the purpose of laughter is correction, and thus 'it is expedient that the correction should reach as great a number of persons as possible'.¹³

In developing this point, Bergson makes a typical, and dubious, analogy between the writer and the scientist; and, like two other theoreticians of humour of the early twentieth century, Freud and Pirandello, Bergson tries to force his view of humour into the confines of a larger theory which he is working out, a 'scientific' explanation of human behaviour. The observation of comedy, he claims,

will not be more than skin-deep, dealing with persons at the point at which they come into contact and become capable of resembling one another...To penetrate too far into the personality, to couple the outer effect with causes that are too deep-seated, would mean to endanger, and in the end to sacrifice all that was laughable in the effect. In order that we may be tempted to laugh at it, we must localise its cause in some intermediate region of the soul. Consequently, the effect must appear to us as an average effect, as expressing an average of mankind. And, like all averages, this one is obtained by bringing together scattered data, by comparing analogous cases and extracting their essence; in short by a process of abstraction and generalisation similar to that which the physicist brings to bear upon facts with the object of grouping them under laws. In a word, method and object are here of the same nature as in the inductive sciences, in that observation is, always external and the result always general.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 111,1,p.157.

¹³ Ibid., 111,1,p.170.

¹⁴ Ibid., 111,1,pp.169-70.

Bergson makes a further point about the typicality of the comic character in discussing the relation between action and character in comedy, by a comparison between comedy and tragedy. Whereas comedy deals in general types, tragedy deals in particularised individuals; thus we can speak of 'a Tartuffe', but not of 'a Phèdre'.¹⁵ And whereas action is essential to tragedy, since it issues from the moral choices of the protagonist, the essence of comedy is character, and any action will do to set in motion the gestures of the comic types.¹⁶

Bergson takes most of his examples of comic characters from the plays of Molière and the farces of Labiche; and if he was offering a description of the mechanics of farce, in which the characters indeed behave like automata, invite our contemptuous laughter, and have no organic connexion with the action of the play in which they appear, his essay would, partly, meet the case; it would not cover all Molière examples, however, applying reasonably well to The Miser, but not to the subversive and elusive ambiguities of The Misanthrope. Bergson's simplifications on behalf of his larger theory certainly do not account for the characters of the amiable humorists of the English tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or for the comic

¹⁵ Ibid., 111, i, p. 166.

¹⁶ Ibid., 111, i, p. 154.

characters of an earlier period, such as Falstaff and Quixote, whose overwhelming individuality excites both our sympathetic laughter and our tears.

Bergson's essay deals with one end of a spectrum of comic characterisation, the end at which the comic character is most representative of a class, his behaviour at all points illustrating the behaviour of members of that class: Molière's Harpagon, representative of the class miser, and Tartuffe, representative of the class hypocrite, are examples of the method at its strongest. But the typicality of a comic character is often a feature exploited by humorous writers when they are at their weakest, as in the opening, sporting, chapters of The Pickwick Papers involving Tupman, Snodgrass, and Winkle, or by bad humorous writers, such as Hook. At the other end of the spectrum are those humorous characters whose individuality is the most remarkable thing about them, and whose typicality is only sketchily suggested. Such characters are Walter Shandy, a highly individualised example of the pedantic type, or Falstaff, whose allegorical role as Vice or Misrule is only faintly suggested; and a consideration of Falstaff will demonstrate the enormous possibilities which were opened for the comic character, and which were seized not only by Shakespeare but, in different ways, by many of the humorous writers who followed him.

Shakespeare treats Falstaff in three different ways. He is first depicted as a character who is divorced from the action of the play; and in his next two manifestations, he is placed in two kinds of relationships to the action. In the first long scene in which he appears, in Act II, Scene iv, in which he gives his account of the robbery at Gadshill and in which, in his further explanations of that account, he is exposed as a liar, Falstaff displays his capacity for fantastic invention in a way in which many of the great comic characters of the nineteenth century were to do. In this scene, the action of the play has stopped, and the social context in which most of it is set has receded into the background. The vacuum is filled by Falstaff's brilliant mental gyrations, in which he reveals his wit, resourcefulness, self-aware self-satire, and the genial way in which he sees the world. Through his apparently inexhaustible linguistic resources, he is able to construct an alternative, autonomous fantasy-world, consistent within itself, over which he has full control, which is separate from and antagonistic to the importunate demands of the 'real' world upon which the play will increasingly insist. And so overwhelming is Falstaff's performance, as he finds more and more ingenious ways to embroider his fantastic lies, that the processes of our moral judgement, of the kind which we apply to the other, 'serious', characters, are for the moment suspended; but as the action proceeds, they are brought into

play again, and, finally, against Falstaff himself.

Falstaff first relates to the action of the play as a satirical commentator on the morality of politics. In his speech on 'honour',¹⁷ and in his witty interpretation of the word 'counterfeit',¹⁸ his linguistic resource acquires a powerful social dimension, attacking the basis of political actions; it is as a sceptical observer that Falstaff constructs another world, not genial and self-delighting, but bitter and destructive. But it is Falstaff who is destroyed, by the forces which he has attacked; he is degraded into an embodiment of the sickness of society which must be swept away, in his intention to 'turn diseases to commodity'.¹⁹ But even when he becomes part of the corruption of the old society, Falstaff can still shrewdly comment upon things as they are; his bravura speech on sack springs from an instinctive awareness of the repellent coldness of one of the new masters, Prince John,²⁰ and he can see clearly through Shallow's illusions and lies.²¹

¹⁷ The First Part of King Henry IV (1598, Arden Edition, 1961), V, i, 127-141.

¹⁸ Ibid., V, iv, 110-128.

¹⁹ The Second Part of King Henry IV (1600, Arden Edition, 1966), I, ii, 249-250.

²⁰ Ibid., IV, iii, 84-123.

²¹ Ibid., III, ii, 296-327.

There is, finally, no room in the new order of political expediency and bureaucratic efficiency which emerges at the end of the play for the subversive and sceptical humorous possibilities suggested by Falstaff in the earlier stages. Each of the alternatives which he represents in humorous terms: the denial, in the Gadshill scene, of the processes of time, change, and ordinary moral judgement, and the awareness, in his satirical role, of the hollowness of political justifications for immoral actions: is replaced by the insistence on the primacy of the pressing concerns of the real world. And it was the various rich possibilities represented by Falstaff which were developed and extended by many of the humorous writers who followed Shakespeare; possibilities which were hastily subordinated by Edgeworth to the demands of didactic clarity, which were triumphantly integrated by Scott into the thematic structure of his Scottish novels, and which were celebrated by Dickens in the first half of his career. For the humorous writers who followed Shakespeare, the question posed by Falstaff was a crucial one: what is the status of an anarchically transforming, self-delighting and sceptical mode of imagination in a world of ordinary moral concern?

One solution to the problem, a solution often given in the treatment of the humorous character in the eighteenth century, was to accept that the

humorous character does indeed inhabit an alternative world to the world of ordinary moral concern, but to suggest that he represents an ideal, higher morality; the humorous character is seen, in this version, as a Quixotic type, asserting the claims of an exalted morality in perpetual collisions with a wicked world. Indeed, the separation of the comic character from the ordinary actions of the world is a general feature in the treatment of such a character, whether Quixotic or not; action is the medium in which the agents of the affairs of the real world, the hero, heroine and villain, move, enmeshed in their concern for the real world's rewards and satisfactions: its money, sex, and power. And when the doings of such a world impinge upon a comic character, the results are various. They can be comic, in the clashes between reality and Quixote or Parson Adams; or shocking, in the dismissal of Falstaff by the new King, in the savage sentencing of Volpone by a corrupt court, and on the occasion when a desperate Jonas Chuzzlewit orders Mrs Gamp to produce Mrs Harris.²² It is with the demands of the real world that the comic character, intent on creating a world of his own, cannot cope; who believes that Mr Micawber ever became a successful magistrate?

It is, however, by his quality of innocence that the Quixotic comic character disqualifies himself from dealing with the sordid world of reality, and

²² Martin Chuzzlewit (1844, Penguin English Library Edition, 1968), Ch. 51, p. 858. All further references to Martin Chuzzlewit are to this edition.

asserts his representativeness of a higher morality. In one of his borrowings from Richter,²³ Coleridge makes the essential contrast between the innocence of the humorous character and the corruption of the ordinary world in which he functions:

First, we respect a humourist, because absence of interested motive is the ground-work of the character, although the imagination of an interest may exist in the individual himself, as if a remarkably simple-hearted man should pride himself on his knowledge of the world, and how well he can manage it:- and secondly, there always is in a genuine humour an acknowledgement of the hollowness and farce of the world, and its disproportion to the godlike within us. And it follows immediately from this, that whenever particular acts have reference to particular selfish motives, the humorous bursts into the indignant and abhorring; whilst all follies not selfish are pardoned or palliated. 24

The re-creation of the Quixotic innocent was a central activity in the humorous writing of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century; and Romanticism gave an added impetus to the development of the humorous character whose social awkwardness was more than compensated for by such morally excellent qualities as shining simplicity and goodness of heart; Dominie Sampson and Newman Noggs are the heirs of Adams and Primrose in this respect. But during the nineteenth century, a more Falstaffian method of asserting independence from the world was

²³ René Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950, vol.2, The Romantic Age (1955), p.153.

²⁴ Lecture 9, 'On the Distinctions of the Witty, the Droll, the Odd, and the Humorous' (1818), in Literary Remains, edited by H.N. Coleridge, vol.1 (1836, AMS Press, 1967), pp.135-6.

developed. It was through their wealth of linguistic resources that many of the great humorous characters of the nineteenth century transformed the world into wondrous new configurations; Thady Quirk, Galt's Provost Pawkie, some of Lamb's whimsical comic creations, and, most outstandingly, Dickens's major comic characters, create worlds of abnormal linguistic intensity, transforming the world into the shapes dictated by their own imagination, as does Falstaff in the Gadshill scene. Both the Quixotic and the Falstaffian comic character come into conflict with the world as it is; but whereas the former triumphs over sordid reality by an educative assertion of a lofty morality, the latter creates from the collision a freedom from moral pressure, transforming reality for our delight rather than our edification. The Falstaffian humorist, too, in his ability to make the familiar strange by egotistically absorbing the world into himself and thus transcending its limitations, echoed an important aspect of the Romantic programme for the imagination; the 'godlike' of Coleridge's account is here not a moral quality, but the transforming power of the creative artist himself, bestowed upon a character.

The essentially linguistic nature of the Falstaffian transformation, the sheer verbal virtuosity involved in this kind of humorous activity, was part of the remoter humorous inheritance of the seventeenth, rather than the eighteenth century, relating more

closely to the Jonson of Volpone and the Swift of A Tale of a Tub than to the writing of eighteenth century humorous novelists. In the humour of Volpone and A Tale of a Tub, the real world is radically undermined, to be replaced by a vision of grotesque and horrifying energy; and an important strain in Romantic humorous writing, no less in Dickens than in Richter and Hoffmann, was the creation of a world of terrifying and grotesque power. It was Dickens who most spectacularly seized the anarchic possibilities of the comic grotesque, embodying in characters such as Fagin, Squeers, and Quilp the kinds of psychological insights shared by Jonson and Swift, and denied expression by any outlet other than the indirect one of humour. When Squeers, tasting the watered-down milk provided for the breakfast of a new batch of victims, exclaims, ' "here's richness!"',²⁵ he causes our laughter to conquer our disgust by his linguistic impertinence, just as we are totally absorbed by Volpone's creative sickness, at the expense of concern for the welfare of the good characters, and by the insanity of Swift's Hack, at the expense of concern for principles of normal morality. Freud's explanation of the psychological basis of this process is, no doubt, plausible; he postulates the idea that humour results from 'an economy in expenditure upon feeling', by which a feeling of pity, disgust, or anger is

²⁵ Nicholas Nickleby (1839, edition of 1892), Ch. 5, p. 43.

suppressed by laughter, as when a man about to be hanged, thus arousing our pity, asks for a scarf to cover his throat, diverting the pity to laughter; and our indignation at Falstaff's behaviour is similarly converted into laughter.²⁶ Perhaps more suggestive might be the notion that Dickens's imagination, in its delighted creation of grotesque humorous characters, resembles the 'poetical Character' of Shakespeare in Keats's description of it - an amoral imagination which delights as much in the creation of an Iago as an Imogen.²⁷ It is in the work of Dickens that the two humorous traditions, the autonomous, self-delighting mode and the moral, socially reconciling aspect, each expressing urgent Romantic creative imperatives, most significantly converge; and the second part of this Introduction will outline the historical origins and general development of these two tendencies.

3

The moral programme for humour which the nineteenth century inherited from the eighteenth, in which the humorous sensibility was an aspect of the growing humanitarianism of the eighteenth century, and a means whereby a message of sentimental

²⁶ Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious (1905), translated by James Strachey (1960), pp. 236, 229, and Note 1, pp. 231-2.

²⁷ Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 Oct. 1818, The Letters of John Keats, edited by Maurice Buxton Forman (1931), 4th edition (1952), pp. 226-7.

benevolism could be conveyed, had its main basis in the creation of the figure of the amiable foible, in whom were shown eccentricities of behaviour commonly scorned or ignored by polite society, but gradually seen as the guarantees of natural feeling and goodness of heart. The way was opened for the creation of the amiable foible at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when both the merciless satirising of humours, whether natural or affected, as deviations from standards of tolerable social behaviour, in the character sketches of Butler and the plays of Congreve, and Dryden's distaste for the low associations of humour and his preference for gentlemanly wit, were modified by, and eventually superceded by, Congreve's distinction, in his theoretical remarks about comedy in his letter to Dennis of 1695, between natural and affected humours, and his belief in the pointlessness of submitting natural humours to satirical treatment.²⁸

The first outstanding example of a natural humour to be celebrated in the eighteenth century was Addison's Sir Roger de Coverley, extolled for his endearing warmth of character and the harmless nature of his

²⁸ Samuel Butler, Characters (1667-9), edited by Charles W. Daves, (Case Western Reserve University Press, 1970), pp. 126-8 and 189-90; Dryden, 'Preface to An Evening's Love' (1671), Essays of John Dryden, edited by W.P. Ker (1900), vol. 1, pp. 139-40; Congreve, 'Concerning Humour in Comedy' (1695), Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, vol. 3, 1685-1700, edited by J.E. Spingarn (1909), pp. 242-252.

amusing little foibles and eccentricities; but he is rather patronised by the Spectator for his quaint political views, themselves an odd foible, and is partly seen through polite eyes as the epitome of the naive rural squire. There is no element of patronising mockery, however, in their creators' views of the two greatest amiable foibles of the eighteenth century: Parson Adams and Uncle Toby.

In his theoretical discussions about humour, Fielding often took the hard-line view, that a humour is a deviation which should be satirised;²⁹ but in his practice as a novelist, he created Parson Adams, a humorous character in whom are enshrined all the virtues of the amiable foible type. Adams is the embodiment of spontaneous and natural good feeling in a world of hypocrisy and self-seeking; uncorrupted by the polite world, he represents standards of Christian conduct and benevolent feeling which remain unimpaired through the shocks of his Quixotic collisions with the real world. And in the depiction of the character of Uncle Toby, Sterne fully reveals Coleridge's 'godlike within us'; the overflowing benevolence of Toby, extending its embrace to the whole of creation, is fully worthy of Tristram's heart-felt tribute:

²⁹ 'The Covent Garden Journal', No.55, July 18 1752, in The Criticism of Henry Fielding, edited by Ioan Williams (1970), pp.174-6.

Peace and comfort rest for evermore upon thy head! - Thou enviedst no man's comforts, - insultedst no man's opinions. - Thou blackendst no man's character, - devouredst no man's bread: gently, with faithful Trim behind thee, didst thou amble round the little circle of thy pleasures, jostling no creature in thy way; - for each one's sorrows, thou hadst a tear, - for each man's need, thou hadst a shilling. 30

The Quixotic function of colliding with the harshness of reality is performed by Walter Shandy, whose notions about the world are continually and comically thwarted by incompetence of others and by accident; but when Toby is reminded of the world's ways, it is a matter for misty-eyed pathos, rather than farcical comedy. Toby is the greatest of the line of humorists who, in a context of ordinary life and even as a matter of patriotic pride, express their natural feelings and foibles without suffering from the inhibitions which oblige the members of polite society to conform to social convention; and Tristram Shandy was extolled by Coleridge and Carlyle as a work of truly universal benevolence, revealing the operation of a sensibility which sees the whole of life in the light of love.

Coleridge, following Richter, distinguished between wit (the discovery of identity in dissimilar things), drollery (where the laughable exists for its own sake), and the grotesque (the unusual juxtaposition

30 Tristram Shandy (1760-67, Penguin English Library Edition, 1967), vol. 3, Ch. 34, p. 230. All further references to Tristram Shandy are to this edition.

of words or images) as types of humour of the mechanical or fanciful kind, and true humour, which springs from the apprehension of the peculiarities of character as a 'growth from within';³¹ later, Lamb noted that Quixote's 'pitiabie infirmity...misleads him, always from within, into half-ludicrous, but more than half-compassionable and admirable errors'.³² Sterne's excellence as a humorist consists in his ability to combine an interest in the minutiae of individual particularity with the representative nature of the individual case; but even more valuably than this, the humorist possesses a sympathetic sensibility, through which the whole of existence is seen; and the moral function of this sensibility, in Carlyle's interpretation of Richter, is a reconciling one. Humour is the medium through which the contradictions of the world are perceived and reconciled; in his humour, Richter 'sports with the highest and the lowest',³³ thus achieving a harmony between self and the world: 'The essence of humour is sensibility; warm, tender fellow-feeling with all forms of existence.'³⁴ The gentle playfulness of humour is stressed by Carlyle in discussing his favourite humorists, Cervantes, Richter, and Sterne:

³¹ Coleridge, loc. cit., pp. 131-4.

³² 'Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art' (1833), The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb, edited by E.V. Lucas (1912), vol. 2, Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia, p. 265. All further references to Lamb's works are to this edition.

³³ 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1827), Works, Centenary Edition, edited by H.D. Traill (1896-9), vol. 22 (German Romance, Vol. 2), pp. 121-2. All further references to Carlyle's works are to this edition (with the exception of 'Illudo Chartis').

³⁴ 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1827), Works (Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, vol. 1), vol. 26, p. 16.

'the humour of Cervantes and Sterne...(is)... the product not of Contempt but of Love...of deep though playful sympathy with all forms of Nature', which results not in laughter but in something 'far kindlier and better...a simple humble pathos'.³⁵

The reconciling function of humour was carried through also, although on a less fervidly cosmic level, by Scott, who, in bringing together in the humorous characters of his Scottish novels the full range of his sociological and historical analysis, accepts the idea that the natural feelings embodied in the humorous characters are more valuable and important than the artificial manners of those who inhabit the higher social spheres. It is, in fact, the humorous characters of these novels, rather than the heroes, who represent most fully the central historical tensions which bring to a conclusion the Enlightenment view of man and society; not only are the heroes constrained by their birth to express, to a great extent, artificial as against natural feeling, but Scott stresses the representative nature of the hero's position at the expense of bringing out his individuality, whereas in the humorous characters, representativeness and individuality are in perfect balance. Scott, indeed, saw his humorous characters in a special way, which anticipates later Romantic

³⁵'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1827), Works, vol. 22, p.123.

attitudes of affection towards (especially humorous) characters. They were conceived, says Scott, in a rare discussion of his creative practice, as an act of imaginative love, taking control of their creator's mind, as distinct from the heroes and heroines, who supplied the essential didactic structure, and who were rather conceived out of duty. After admitting that, despite his best efforts to organise his stories, his imagination invents characters and incidents which sabotage the original conception, Scott puts his finger on the comic characters as a main source of the trouble; and his remarks anticipate what Forster called 'the very process of creation' of Dickens in writing Martin Chuzzlewit, when everything

had grown under treatment, as will be commonly the case in the handling of a man of genius, who never knows where any given conception may lead him, out of the wealth of resource in development and incident which it has itself created. 'As to the way,' he wrote to me of its two most prominent figures, as soon as all their capabilities were revealed to him, 'as to the way in which these characters have opened out, that is to me one of the most surprising processes of the mind in this sort of invention. Given what one knows, what one does not know springs up...' 36

In his own way, too, Scott describes the processes of spontaneous creative growth while writing Rob Roy and A Legend of Montrose:

Alas! my dear sir, you do not know the force of paternal affection. When I light on such a character as Bailie Jarvie, or Dalgetty, my imagination brightens, and my conception becomes clearer at every step which I take in his company,

although it leads me many a weary mile away from the regular road, and forces me to leap hedge and ditch to get back into the route again. If I resist the temptation...my thoughts become prosy, flat, and dull; I write painfully to myself, and under a consciousness of flagging which makes me flag still more; the sunshine with which fancy had invested the incidents, departs from them, and leaves everything dull and gloomy. I am no more the same author I was in my better mood, than the dog in a wheel, condemned to go round and round for hours, is like the same dog merrily chasing his own tail, and gambolling in all the frolic of unrestrained freedom. In short, sir, on such occasions I think I am bewitched. 37

The complex richness of this creative achievement is Scott's greatest legacy from the three sources which most inspired him: the novelists and the social historians of the eighteenth century, and Shakespeare. Scott's humorous characters embody that reverence for the natural affections of ordinary life which animated the creation of the amiable foibles of the eighteenth century; and, in taking over many of the humorous types (the Scottish pedant, the Quixotic innocent, the benevolent misanthrope) of his predecessors, Scott softened their harshness, and often invested them with a kind of representative sublimity, a dimension which was lacking in their treatment by a writer such as Smollett, who tended to bring out the harshly grotesque element in the comic character. He took over, too, the panoramic social novel developed by his immediate predecessor, Maria Edgeworth, using

37 Introductory Epistle to The Fortunes of Nigel (1822), The Waverley Novels, Centenary Edition (Edinburgh 1870-1, Edition of 1883), vol. 7, p. 16. All further references to Scott's novels are to this edition.

it as a vehicle for the expounding of the social history of Scotland from the middle of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century. This social history is expressed in imaginative tensions, moving between the balanced attractions of the past and the present, of the Highlands and the Lowlands, of the rationalist and the sentimental views of life, tensions embodied most profoundly in Dalgetty, Cuddie Headrigg, Bradwardine, and Jarvie, who are integrated into the thematic structure of the novels as Falstaff is integrated into the structure of the Henry IV plays.

But it was not the expressive integration by Scott of his humorous characters into the thematic structure of his novels which formed the final development of the nineteenth century moral humorous sensibility. The climax of this sensibility was a dialectical, metaphysical view of humour, in which was fulfilled the Romantics' desire to unify and reconcile, and which operated on several levels. Humour was seen as brought about by the dynamic interplay of opposites

such as pathos and laughter, which merge to create the humorous dimension; and, also, other opposites were brought into conjunction to achieve the humorous fusion: the individual merged with the representative, the ridiculous with the sublime. There was, too, a social dimension in humour's reconciling dialectic; in an age when mechanical principles and the cash nexus threatened to sunder

man from man, humour presented in a sympathetic light those individuals and social groups whom, in Forster's phrase, 'the world turns impatiently aside at':³⁸ the poor, the oppressed, and the unfortunate.

The humour of moral sensibility, social concern and metaphysical aspiration reaches its climax in the theory of Carlyle, and in his single attempt, in Sartor Resartus, to express this theory in a work of the imagination. Metaphysical and mystical humour grasps the spiritual nature of Man, juxtaposing his greatness and his pettiness by humorous irony, and leads to the annihilation of both greatness and littleness by contrast with the Infinite, which emerges as the possibility of Man's spiritual rebirth, a final cosmic harmony in which Man's deepest spiritual needs can be realised in appropriate social forms. What Coleridge described as humour's 'reference to the general and the universal, by which the finite great is brought into identity with the little, or the little with the finite great, so as to make both nothing in comparison with the infinite'³⁹ is the programme of Sartor Resartus, and humour's highest moral task.

³⁸ Forster, op.cit., Book 9, Ch.1, p.727.

³⁹ Coleridge, loc.cit., p.136.

That the humorous imagination could be a great instrument for moral good was frequently, and with increasingly sentimental fervour, asserted in the theories of humour of the Romantics, but often at the price of partialities, evasions, and contradictions of the writer's own practice. And there were humorous writers of the period whose humorous imagination undermined, from sceptical and ironical stances, the assumptions of the moral humorous tradition, or who used humorous modes such as the terrible grotesque, the moral basis of which was far from obvious. And there grew up, in the early nineteenth century, a genre of humour which ignored moral considerations altogether in its simple desire to offer an escape; the genre which became known as light humour.

Light humour was essentially a development of characterisation in the amiable foible tradition, but without the force of the moral dimension which that character possessed. The main ingredient of the humorous character becomes a whimsical and mildly ironic self-awareness; the amiable foible has become cosily conscious of his eccentricity, which he brandishes as evidence of his harmless (and often brainless) geniality. Among the first examples of characters of light humour were those who appeared in the essays of Lamb, and the first light humour series in a magazine was 'Noctes Ambrosianae',

a series of articles which ran in Blackwood's Magazine from 1822 to 1835. The creation of the series, and of the magazine in general, brought together many of the journalists who inhabited the world of journalism of the 1820s and 1830s; a sordid, raffish Bohemia of drinking, debts, duels and lawsuits. The 'Noctes' series was invented by the garrulous, erratic Irishman William Maginn, who also edited Fraser's Magazine for the first six years of its existence, from 1830 to 1836, and who wrote Whitehall, an unreadable farrago which qualifies as the unfunniest comic novel ever written. Most of the 'Noctes' between 1825 and 1835 were written by the hearty and profoundly neurotic John Wilson ('Christopher North'), who helped to found Blackwood's in 1817, with assistance from the venomous and sinister Lockhart and the absurd and vain Hogg; the three of them were jointly responsible for the notorious 'Chaldee Manuscript', concocted to rescue the new magazine from foundering, which, in a parody of the Biblical convention of chapters and verses, shocked Edinburgh in October 1817 by what now seem to be remarkably infantile, and occasionally libellous, accounts of the doings of prominent people of the town.

In the 'Noctes' series we overhear the informal conversation of a group of cronies: North (Wilson), the Shepherd (Hogg), Odoherly (Maginn), and Timothy Tickler (Lockhart or Maginn), with occasional guests

such as Hook: as they sit drinking in Ambrose's tavern, on topics ranging from the literary to the political, and the humour ranges from the genial to the macabre, from the grotesque to the scurrilous. Lockhart provided, in August 1831, some vicious political portraits in the manner of the 'Chaldee Manuscript', one example of which, an account of the Irishman Shiel as he speaks in the Commons, will suffice to give the flavour of the scurrilous mode:

A more insignificant person as to the bodily organ I never set spectacles on. Small of the smallest in stature, shabby of the shabbiest in attire, fidgety and tailorlike in gesture, in gait shambling and jerking - with an invisible nose, huge nostrils, a cheesy complexion, and a Jewish chin. You would say it was impossible that any thing worth hearing should come from such an abortion. Nor do the first notes redeem him. His voice is as hoarse as a deal-board, except when it is as piercing as the rasp of a gimlet; and of all the brogues I have heard, his is the most abominable - quite of the sunk area school. But never mind - wait a little - and this vile machinery will do wonders. 40

There are some successes in that peculiarly Scottish mode, the lyrical/macabre; there is a brilliant set-piece written by Wilson and spoken by Hogg on the subject of the contours of Wilson's face as he sits apparently asleep, culminating in the evocation of his death by drowning and hanging; and

⁴⁰ Blackwood's Magazine, vol. 30, August 1831, p. 411.

a series of vivid word-paintings on the subject of murder anticipate De Quincey's more famous tour de force.⁴¹ Despite the prolix, rambling, and obscure style affected by Wilson, and the ephemeral nature of many of the topics covered, the 'Noctes' series was the first attempt to build up a set of idiosyncratic contributors on a regular basis, establishing the formula and the kinds of characterisation which later became the staples of light humour.

It was particularly in the magazines founded at this time : Blackwood's, Fraser's, Hood's Comic Annual⁴² and especially Punch: that light humour established itself as a genre. There were great successes, such as the 'Noctes' series, Jerrold's series featuring Mrs Caudle, running in Punch in 1845, and, most outstanding of all, Thackeray's contributions to Punch, written under various pseudonyms. Thackeray brought the whimsical, self-mocking, escapist ingredients of light humour to perfection in his incarnations as Michael Angelo Titmarsh and the Fat Contributor, never quite allowing the whimsy to become self-indulgent or cosy, as it was already becoming in the 1830s and 40s, in such novels as Peter Simple, Harry Lorrequer, and Handy Andy, which are full of ossified lovable eccentrics and 'characters', many of whom went on to people another developing nineteenth century genre, juvenile fiction.

⁴¹ Ibid, vol. 24, October 1828, pp. 512-5; vol. 15, April 1824, pp. 376-9.

⁴² J.C.Reid, Thomas Hood (1963), pp. 111-7.

But there was a more direct and serious challenge to the humorous celebration of individual idiosyncrasy; a challenge which undermined its whole moral basis in the amiable foible tradition. Jane Austen looks back to the plays of Congreve in her assertion, in Pride and Prejudice and Emma, that humour in a character, whether affected or natural, far from being a matter for sympathetic approval and warm affection, is an egotistical deviation from standards of rational social behaviour, and should be exposed, ruthlessly if the humour is affected. The humorous characters of Pride and Prejudice and Emma, relegated firmly to the periphery of the action, are an awful warning to the heroine, whose psychological development and final maturity define the norms from which they so startlingly deviate. Mr Collins, Lady Catherine, and Mrs Elton, like the fops and fools of Congreve, flatly embody the conception of humour as deviation; through them Austen is declaring, in tones which were not heard until half a century later, that the proper subject of the novel is to be the revelation, through the processes of detailed psychological analysis, of the moral growth of the social personality, an undertaking which humour is quite inadequate to perform. Austen's announcement that the humorous character is dead was, as it happened, premature; the time-bomb did not explode until the 1850s. But by the time Eliot had acted on the basis of that assumption, the central moral function of humour, the reconciliation of man

with man on the basis of sympathetic understanding of individual idiosyncrasy, became a possibility after humour had first been abandoned.

Peacock, however, was not sceptical of the long-established status of the humorous character as an amiable foible; indeed, he developed and extended the idea, giving his characters a fixed intellectual idea as their ruling passion. In his novels, several such characters are brought together, taking part in extended conversations in which such current topics as the advantages of the primitive over the civilised life, the problem of population, the spread of popular education, the uses of periodical criticism, Romantic morbidity and German obscurity, landscape gardening and political economy, are discussed by characters who are often thin disguises of men of the day; Coleridge, Southey, Shelley, Repton, and Byron are among those who appear. On the whole, the satire is genial, contenting itself with pointing out the harmless absurdity of many of the cranky ideas which the protagonists of the debates put forward; and it is in his gently satirical vein that Peacock shows the original, if minor, nature of his contribution to the humour of the time. But a scepticism increasingly sought expression in the satire; a more ambitious, and less successful, attempt to probe more deeply the underlying causes of the social malaise was attempted, in which the tone is not genial but shrill and strained. Melincourt, the most ambitious of his novels in its serious satirical pretensions, remains a series of

disjointed sections, in which amiable satire alternates uneasily with an attempt to expose serious social evils such as industrialism; and his last novel of this period, Crotchet Castle, represents a breakdown in which the weight of the social problems analysed shatters the whimsical framework of the amiable foible convention in which the analysis is placed.

A more satisfactorily sustained intellectual position on which a sceptical stance could be based was worked out by Byron in his poem Don Juan. It is a version of the notion, developed by Friedrich Schlegel (although Schlegel was not Byron's source),⁴³ of Romantic Irony. The materials of the ironic stance are scepticism and self-parody, which record an awareness of the ultimately indefinable complexity of reality. The chaos at the centre of reality is acknowledged by the ironist's transcending it, and transcending the transcendence, in a constant, dynamic series of self-cancelling movements. Like the Richterian humorist, the Romantic ironist is aware of the disparity between the finite and the infinite; but he does not attempt a reconciliation, but rather demonstrates his awareness of his inability to attain the ideal: 'Caught between his aspirations for an ideal he knows is beyond his reach and his limitations of which he is equally aware, the

⁴³ Diary entry, January 28 1821, Byron: Selected Prose (Penguin English Library Edition, 1972), p. 380.

only possibility for the ironist is a continual dialectic process of ironic affirmations and negations.⁴⁴

Such a process is set up by the sceptical persona of Don Juan, who undermines both his own radical moral positions and his paradoxes in a series of self-cancelling propositions, propelling the poem towards an infinite regress of ironies. The threat of moral chaos suggested by the sceptical irony of Don Juan is another serious challenge to the predominant humour of moral affirmation which, in the case of Sartor Resartus, also adopts an ironical form. But the ironical juxtapositions of Carlyle's work firmly lead the bewildered reader in the direction of moral assertion, whereas Byron's irony creates a confusion which is left unresolved; and the linguistic audacities of Carlyle have a palpable design upon the reader, rather than extending, as do Byron's linguistic transformations, the open-ended nature of the work.

Thackeray was a writer who absorbed much from Carlyle and who, ironically enough, used humorous procedures resembling those of Byron in his attempts to work out his path as a humorous novelist. The flexible, ironic, and implicating voice of the narrator of Vanity Fair evolved only after ten years of humorous experimenting, involving false starts

⁴⁴ D.C. Muecke, The Compass of Irony (1969), p.201.

and dead-ends, until the appropriate medium was at last found. From the start of his career, Thackeray knew what his subject was to be : the world of the shabby-genteel, of swindlers and their dupes, of the snobs and the hypocrites who vainly try to keep up appearances, of the parasites living well on nothing a year. He also knew that he was a humorous writer; but his attempts to render humorously the world which interested him, in his early work, frequently met with failure. Falling back on caricature and farce-like events as humorous methods revealed that these established comic procedures were too crude to record his insights; too often his own feelings of disgust and contempt burst through, destroying the control of the material; and the distress which he saw was often simply too harrowing for successful humorous treatment. The story of the development of his early work, leading to the triumph of Vanity Fair, is the story of the evolution of a humorous sensibility which learns to avoid extremes of statement, holds a balance between sentiment and satire, and constantly threatens to implicate the reader, and the author himself, in its damaging judgements. Like Byron, Thackeray, in his mature manner, will gain the reader's complacent assent, only to reverse his judgement: hypocrisy, as we all know, he will comfortably confide, is corrupting; but is it not a necessary strategy in the carrying on of the social life, needing resources of courage which are, in a way, to be admired? Such a humorous

sensibility, probing with deceptive politeness the depths of the selfishness and self-deception which are the moving principles of the comedy of the social life, is far removed from the humour of moral affirmation and spiritual hope of Carlyle and his predecessors, and contrasts, indeed, with the orthodox piety of Thackeray's own theoretical remarks on humour; the sympathy it shows is that of a sinner for his fellow sinners, whose failures he understands and shares.

Dickens, on the other hand, shows no uneasiness in his cheerful and unselfconscious reliance on stock characters and farce-like events for his humorous effects; and, as Forster testified, much of Dickens's humour follows Carlyle's lead in expousing the cause of the poor and the oppressed and in showing, as Fielding and Scott did, that goodness of heart is more valuable than social accomplishment; the moral aspects of Dickens's humour were universally celebrated, and characterised in Thackeray's phrase about A Christmas Carol being 'a national benefit'.⁴⁵ But there was another, equally important, aspect of Dickens's humorous sensibility, which Forster played down because it embarrassed him; that aspect which resembles the anarchic grotesque of Jonson and Swift, expressed in Fagin, Quilp, and Mrs Gamp, by which Dickens creates

⁴⁵ 'A Box of Novels', Fraser's Magazine, vol. 29, February 1844, p. 169.

Falstaffian alternative worlds of wonder and horror so powerful in their comic intensity that the processes of normal moral judgement are suspended as we fall under their spell. Such imaginative activity was not developed over a long period of experimenting; it is seen in Sketches by Boz, where Dickens invests familiar objects with a vivid freshness of vision, an activity which lay at the heart of the Romantic desire to 'carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood' which Coleridge saw as 'the character and privilege of genius',⁴⁶ and which Wordsworth, in his contributions to the Lyrical Ballads, made his central poetical object:

...to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand. ⁴⁷

It is not to the objects of the natural world that Dickens's transforming vision is directed in Sketches by Boz and the novels which follow, but to the sights of London, which are invested with a child-like and delighted wonder, revealing the operation of the same

⁴⁶ Biographia Literaria (1817), edited by George Watson (Everyman Edition, 1960), p.49.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.169.

kind of imaginative love which Scott confessed to feeling towards Jarvie and Dalgetty. The wonder and the terror of the child's vision of the world lie behind much of Dickens's humorous writing, giving Fagin and Quilp their characteristic ambivalence, by which they attract and repel at the same time. They lie, too, behind such a portrait as that of Mrs Pipchin, whose character and environment are rendered with typical linguistic virtuosity, in a novel in which an urgent social concern is beginning to push the humorous characters to the periphery imaginatively as well as officially. The hardness of the old woman's character (a hardness which reflects the central emotional condition of the novel) is rendered through her appearance (her 'mottled face, like bad marble' and her 'hard grey eye', which 'looked as if it might have been hammered at on an anvil without sustaining any injury'), her dress of black bombazeen, so dark that 'gas itself couldn't light her up after dark, and her presence was a quencher to any number of candles', and her history, as the widow of Mr Pipchin, who had died forty years previously in the Peruvian mines, of which experience Mrs Pipchin still bore the evidences: 'She was such a bitter old lady, that one was tempted to believe there had been some mistake in the application of the Peruvian machinery, and that all her waters of gladness and milk of human kindness had been pumped out dry, instead

of the mines; and her shell-like house contains appropriately hairy and spiky plants, and is overrun with spiders and earwigs.⁴⁸

In such humorous transformations, Dickens asserts, for the last time on such a scale in English writing, the power of the humorous mode established by Shakespeare in his treatment of Falstaff's account of what happened to him on the night of the robbery at Gadshill. The pressures and demands from the world of ordinary moral judgements are left in abeyance as we witness an act of imaginative love which gives delight through its pathos and its beauty, and which is once again creatively embodied in Mrs Nickleby's egotistical lament for the dead Smike:

'I am sure,' said Mrs Nickleby, wiping her eyes, and sobbing bitterly, 'I have lost the best, the most zealous, and most attentive creature that has ever been a companion to me in my life - putting you, my dear Nicholas, and Kate, and your poor papa, and that well-behaved nurse who ran away with the linen and the twelve small forks, out of the question of course'.... 49

But it was clear, by about 1850, that the moral programme of humour was not being implemented by the two greatest humorous writers of the time; the

⁴⁸ Dombey and Son (1848), Clarendon Edition (1974), Ch.8, pp.100-1.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Nickleby, Ch.61, p.748.

operations of Thackeray's subversive ironies and of Dickens's transforming visions were equally far from the reconciling possibilities at the heart of humour's moral purposes. And for the last great writer for whom reconciliation of man to man was still a possibility, it was clear that humour could not achieve that end. For George Eliot, sympathy for the everyday could be brought about neither by scepticism, nor by picturing idealities which offered escape from the pressures of the real world, but by the insistence that there is no alternative, autonomous world, and that the only basis for optimism lies in confronting reality in all its unattractive harshness.

CHAPTER ONE. 'THE GODLIKE WITHIN US' : HUMOUR
IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

1

This chapter outlines the first stage, and the basis, of the development of the moral tendency of humour which the nineteenth century inherited from the eighteenth: the creation of the figure of the amiable foible. Of the five main examples discussed: Sir Roger de Coverley, Parson Adams, Doctor Primrose, Toby Shandy, and Matthew Bramble: Adams and Toby Shandy are the most important, leading on, in their different ways, to the achievement of the nineteenth century humorists. The humorous practice and theory of Fielding present two opposed views of humour which were inherited in the next century; the predominant view, embodied in Adams, that a humour is a lovable eccentricity to be celebrated, and the view that a humour is a deviation, which must be presented satirically. The predominant view led on to those humorous characters of Scott and Dickens who are socially awkward but sincere and benevolent of heart, and the satirical view led on to Austen, who presents the humorous characters of Pride and Prejudice and Emma as deviations from right social conduct. In Tristram Shandy the fullest possibilities of developing individual idiosyncrasy were seized,

and Sterne's benevolent and loving vision was extolled by Coleridge and emulated by Carlyle.

The origin of both the benevolist and the satirical views of a humour derives from Jonson's assertion, in Every Man out of his Humour, that a humour is produced

As when some one peculiar quality
Doth so possesse a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluctions, all to runne one way,
This may be truly said to be a Humour. ¹

Jonson himself, in his plays, satirised a humour whether it was a natural trait of character or an affectation; and his treatment of the humour was complemented in the seventeenth century by the fashion of writing the Theophrastan 'character' taken up by Overbury, Hall, and Earle in the first half of the century, and by Butler in the second half. The method of Theophrastus was to first define the quality to be analysed: 'Stupidity', for example, is defined as a 'slowness of mind in word and deed': and then to give examples of the quality in action: '...and the Stupid man he, that after he has cast up an account, will ask one that sits by what it comes to; when a summons has been taken against him, forgets about it and goes out to his farm on the very day he is to appear;

¹ Every Man out of his Humour (1600), Ben Jonson, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson (1927, reprinted 1954), vol. 3, p. 432, lines 105-9.

when he goes to the play is left at the end fast asleep in an empty house.' ²

A more complex style than that of Theophrastus was evolved by Overbury, Hall, and Earle for the characterisation of vices and virtues; but Butler concentrates on the vices. The characters of the Fanatic and the Humorist are savagely attacked; a Humour is defined by Butler as 'but a Crookedness of the Mind, a disproportioned Swelling of the Brain'; but although the Humorist is mad, he is not dangerous; he is 'exempted from a dark Room and a Doctor, because there is no Danger in his Frenzy; otherwise he has as good Title to fresh Straw as another'. ³

More promising for the future of the humour than the outbursts of Butler were the less hostile, more discriminating, views of Congreve and Dryden. In his letter to Dennis on humour in comedy of 1695, Congreve carefully distinguishes between the humour as a natural foible on the one hand, and as affectation on the other. He objects to Jonson's treatment of Corbaccio on the grounds that it is ill-natured to expose personal defects to ridicule, and goes on to define a genuine humour as a 'singular and unavoidable

² The Characters of Theophrastus, edited and translated by J.M. Edmonds, Loeb Classical Library (1929), p.75.

³ Samuel Butler 1612-1680: Characters (1667-9), edited by Charles W. Daves (Case Western Reserve University Press, 1970), p.189.

manner of doing or saying any thing, Peculiar and Natural to one Man only, by which his Speech and Actions are distinguish'd from those of other men'.⁴

Thus if a humour is 'born with us' and is 'from Nature', as distinct from affectation, which is 'from Industry', showing us 'what we would be under a Voluntary Disguise'⁵ (and therefore a legitimate subject for satire), there is no point in satirising it, just as there is no point in satirising someone for being deaf. Indeed, a humour was becoming not merely a natural quality, but something to be proud of, in a patriotic kind of way; humours are of such luxuriant growth in England, claims Congreve, because of 'the Greater Freedom, Privilege, and Liberty which the Common People of England enjoy. Any Man that has a Humour is under no restraint or fear of giving it Vent'.⁶ And, in speculating on the variety of life in England, Sir William Temple had come to the same conclusion; such variety sprang from 'the Native Plenty of our Soyl, the unequalness of our Clymat, as well as the Ease of our Government, and the Liberty of Professing Opinions and Factions... we have more Humour, because every Man follows his own, and takes a Pleasure, perhaps a Pride, to shew it'.⁷

⁴ 'Concerning Humour in Comedy' (1695), Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, vol. 3, 1685-1700, edited by J.E. Spingarn (1909), p. 248.

⁵ Ibid., p. 246.

⁶ Ibid., p. 252.

⁷ 'Of Poetry' (1690), ibid., p. 104.

Dryden did not see the growth of humour as connected with the growth of liberty and patriotic pride; for him, the associations of humour were low, and he preferred the more gentlemanly forms of wit. He deplored the fact that Jonson had adorned a genre which was below him; he lacked wit, 'the greatest grace of Comedy', and works of humour without wit are intolerable: 'And to entertain an audience perpetually with humour, is to carry them from the conversation of gentlemen, and treat them with the follies and extravagances of Bedlam'.⁸ Whereas the reaction of the vulgar to humour is coarse laughter, wit produces a 'pleasure that is more noble'⁹ than laughter, in a context in which gentlemen could be 'entertained with the follies of each other'.¹⁰ In stressing the necessity of an upperclass context in which wit, correcting social vices, produces the laughter of the mind, Dryden looks forward to the tradition of the comedy of manners as practised by Austen and Meredith; and whereas the comedy of manners tends towards a satiric stance, the comedy of humours takes eccentricity and natural feeling as the materials of sympathetic approval.

⁸ 'Preface to An Evening's Love; or, The Mock Astrologer' (1671), Essays of John Dryden, edited by W.P.Ker (1900), vol.1, pp.139-41.

⁹ Ibid., p.143.

¹⁰ 'Defence of the Epilogue; Or, an Essay on the Dramatic Poetry of the Last Age' (1672), *ibid.*, p.177.

The first important example in the eighteenth century of a character whose eccentricities and natural feelings earn a warm place in our hearts is Sir Roger de Coverley, invented by Steele and developed by Addison in the pages of The Spectator in 1711-12. He is the first fully developed loveable eccentric, the archetype of a long line of endearing characters, whose oddity 'creates him no Enemies, for he does nothing with Sowness or Obstinacy; and his being unconfined to Modes and Forms, makes him but the readier and more capable to please and oblige all who know him'.¹¹ In Sir Roger, Addison inaugurates the practice of locating the amiable humorist in a rural context, continued in the portrayals of Parson Adams and Doctor Primrose; in such a setting, his simplicity can shine forth, free of the artificiality and affected forms of behaviour imposed by the pressures towards conformity which exist in an urban environment. The knight's oddities of behaviour, such as waking up in church and admonishing a member of the congregation for talking, or making an irrelevant speech at the Assizes, 'to shew the Spectator what is thought of him in the country' as Hazlitt put it,¹² are not only amusing in themselves, but they earn

¹¹ The Spectator, March 2 1711, edited by Donald F. Bond (1965), vol. 1, p. 7.

¹² Lectures on the English Comic Writers (1819), Complete Works, edited by P. P. Howe (1930-4), vol. 6, pp. 97-8. All further references to Hazlitt's works are to this edition.

him the respect of his unsophisticated neighbours, and in this sense they hold the parish together socially, enabling it to function smoothly as a community:

This Authority of the Knight, though exerted in that odd Manner which accompanies him in all Circumstances of Life, has a very good Effect upon the Parish, who are not polite enough to see any thing ridiculous in his Behaviour; besides that, the general good Sense and Worthiness of his Character, make his Friends observe these little Singularities as Foils that rather set off than blemish his good Qualities. 13

But the Spectator is himself of the polite world, and he sometimes views Sir Roger's naive ways with a worldly eye which suggests the gentlest of satire of the knight, whose half-credulous attitude to Moll White, a reputed witch, occasions a more distanced treatment of the old man: 'I...could not forbear smiling to hear Sir ROGER, who is a little puzzled about the old Woman, advising her as a Justice of Peace to avoid all Communication with the Devil, and never to hurt any of her Neighbours Cattle', and on the strength of some reports, he 'would frequently have bound her over to the County Sessions, had not his Chaplain with much ado perswaded him to the contrary'.¹⁴ And, like Addison, both Fielding and Goldsmith occasionally view their creations, Adams and Primrose, in a satirical light.

¹³ The Spectator, July 9 1711, vol. 1, p. 461.

¹⁴ Ibid., July 14 1711, p. 482.

An important theoretical contribution to the interpretation of the humorist as a lovable eccentric was made by Corbyn Morris, in his 'Essay Towards fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule. To which is Added, an Analysis of the Characters of an Humourist, Sir John Falstaff, Sir Roger de Coverly, and Don Quixote',¹⁵ of 1744. This essay forms a bridge in its analysis of humour, looking back to Congreve and Addison in some ways, and forward to Hazlitt, Lamb and Romantic feeling in others.

Morris begins by expressing dissatisfaction with the definitions of wit and humour offered by Locke, Congreve and Addison, and he sets about providing some definitions of his own. He points out that Congreve's definition of humour is too general, and defines humour himself as 'any Whimsical Oddity or Foible, appearing in the Temper or Conduct of a Person in real Life' (p.12) and a humorist as 'a Person in real Life, obstinately attached to sensible peculiar Oddities of his own genuine Growth, which appear in his Temper and Conduct' (p.15). The general characteristics of a humorist are his disdain of ostentation, his determination to show his independency and freedom, and his dislike of

¹⁵ Augustan Reprint Society, Series 1, Essays on Wit No.4, November 1947. All page references to Morris's essay are incorporated into the text. The italics of the original have been omitted.

affectation and of those who behave in a servile way; these qualities recall both the theory that exhibiting humours is a typically English method of showing patriotic pride, and Addison's linking of rural simplicity with humour by contrast with the artificial nature of the manners of the town. But the humorist, Morris goes on, is sometimes peevish, and proud without knowing it (benevolent misanthropes such as Goldsmith's *Man in Black*, Smollett's *Matthew Bramble*, and Scott's *Oldbuck* have the former characteristic, and Adams is satirised by Fielding for his vanity about his learning); but he is mainly a man of warmth and benevolence of feeling.

Morris then develops an extensive comparison between wit and humour (a distinction which continued to interest Hazlitt, De Quincey and George Eliot), having earlier defined wit as 'the LUSTRE resulting from the quick ELUCIDATION of one Subject, by a just and unexpected ARRANGEMENT of it with another Subject' (p.1); and among the points he makes in defending his preference for humour over wit are that humour is from 'Nature' whereas wit is 'Art' (p.23), recalling Congreve's stress on humour's derivation from Nature and anticipating Hazlitt's distinction that 'Humour is ... the growth of nature and accident; wit is the product of art and fancy',¹⁶ humour persists,

¹⁶ Hazlitt, *op.cit.*, p.15.

whereas wit expires in a brief flash (recalling Addison's similar preference for 'fixt and permanent' cheerfulness over 'short and transient' mirth);¹⁷ and whereas wit tends towards satire, humour, 'in the Representation of the Foibles of Persons in real Life, frequently exhibits very generous benevolent Sentiments of Heart; And these, tho' exerted in a particular odd Manner, justly command our Fondness and Love' (p.24).

Morris concludes his survey of humour by recruiting Sir Roger, Falstaff, and Quixote into the army of amiable humorists who commend themselves to us by their warmth of personality. We love Sir Roger for his 'Honour, Hospitality, and universal Benevolence' (p.32); Falstaff is a more complex case, but the conclusions to which Morris comes about him are essentially the same as Hazlitt's conclusions. Falstaff represents, according to Morris, a mixture of humour and wit, and our pleasure comes from observing their interaction in his character; for example, in the matter of his cowardice, 'For the sake of his Wit you forgive his Cowardice; or rather, are fond of his Cowardice for the Occasions it gives to his Wit' (p.26), a point reasserted by Hazlitt, in claiming that Falstaff's cowardice, among his other qualities, exists for the amusement of others.

¹⁷ The Spectator, May 17 1712, vol.3, p.429.

And whereas Jonson's characters disgust us by their malice (Hazlitt, too, had a dislike of the 'cold' Jonson), Falstaff gains our esteem and love:

Shakespear, besides the peculiar Gaiety in the Humour of Falstaff, has guarded him from disgusting you with his forward Advances, by giving him Rank and Quality; from being despicable by his real good Sense and excellent Abilities; from being odious by his harmless Plots and Designs; and from being tiresome by his inimitable Wit, and his new and incessant Sallies of highest Fancy and Frolick. (p.30)

Morgann, of course, denied that Falstaff was a coward; but in his general discussion of Falstaff's character he bridges the gap between Morris and Hazlitt in bringing out more firmly Falstaff's quality of self-awareness, by which Falstaff perceives and exposes his own incongruities through his wit; he can 'lend out his own superior wit and humour against himself, and...heighten the ridicule by all the tricks and arts of buffoonery for which his corpulence, his age, and situation, furnish such excellent materials'.¹⁸ It is Falstaff's selfawareness from which his linguistic versatility arises, and which distinguishes him from the amiable foible type as represented by Adams or Primrose.

In his treatment of Don Quixote (pp.38-41), Morris begins the theoretical process, continued by

¹⁸ An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff (1777), Maurice Morgann: Shakespearean Criticism, edited by Daniel A. Fineman (1972), p.211.

Lamb and Hazlitt, of detaching him from exclusively satirical interpretation. Although he is ridiculed for his absurd attempts in the area of knight errantry, argues Morris, we esteem him for his good sense on other matters; his foibles are inspired by good principles and there is a sense of poignancy when his dignity is mortified; and Lamb and Hazlitt developed the point that Quixote is not the subject of satire, because he is a good man, and stressed that we should cry over, rather than laugh at, his exploits. And two years before the publication of Morris's essay, Fielding had revolutionised the Quixote figure, along Romantic lines, in Joseph Andrews.

2

Fielding is of central importance in the development of humour in the eighteenth century because he represents, in his theoretical writing about humour and in his humorous practice in Joseph Andrews, both the satirical and sympathetic attitudes towards humour. In his satirical approach to humour, in which he sees humour as an affectation, a weakness to be exposed, he reveals the kind of sensibility which looks back to Congreve; but in his treatment, in Parson Adams, of humour as an amiable and natural foible to be found in a context of low life, he anticipates an important aspect of the Romantic approach to humour.

In 'An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men', Fielding anatomises the worst affectation of all, hypocrisy. In a vision of the world as a 'vast Masquerade',¹⁹ of disguise and deceit, the hypocrite plays the central role, as he does in Joseph Andrews in the forms of the self-deceivers Lady Booby and Mrs Slipslop, the Man of Courage who turns out to be a coward, the False Promiser who compulsively lies and produces nothing, and the hypocritical clergymen Barnabas and Trulliber; all these characters are satirised by Fielding, and contrasted with the figure of Adams, a man of 'perfect Simplicity',²⁰ as Fielding calls him. By contrast, the essay reserves its main attack for the most dangerous figure of all, the sanctified hypocrite, whose facade is a masterpiece of perfect deceit.²¹

In his later definition of humour, Fielding maintained that it was a deviation from a civilised norm of behaviour, which made men ridiculous; humour is 'a violent Impulse of the Mind, determining it to some one peculiar Point, by which a Man becomes ridiculously distinguished from all other Men'.²² The true source of the ridiculous is affectation, which appears in the forms of vanity and hypocrisy,

¹⁹ 'An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men (c.1739-40), in Miscellanies, edited by Henry Knight Miller, vol.1 (1972), p.155.

²⁰ Joseph Andrews, Preface, p.10.

²¹ Miscellanies, pp.168-74.

²² 'The Covent Garden Journal', July 18 1752, in The Criticism of Henry Fielding, edited by Ioan Williams (1970), p.175.

the latter being the more insidious of the two.²³ Fielding defends his admiration for Jonson on the grounds that he understood the ridiculous the best, and he praises the 'great Triumvirate' of Swift, Cervantes, and Lucian because of their sense of satirical mission, 'because they all endeavoured, with the utmost Force of their Wit and Humour, to expose and extirpate those Follies and Vices which chiefly prevailed in their several Countries'.²⁴ Fielding also dismisses the complacent patriotic explanation for the prevalence of humour among the English; it is not due to the growth of English liberty that the country is full of lovable eccentrics, he claims, but it is certainly due to the deplorable system of education in England that the country is full of clowns and coxcombs, who have no conception of the nature of good breeding, which in its highest form is the Christian command that you should do unto others as you would that they should do unto you.²⁵

In this theory of humour, then, and in his presentation of the self-deceivers and the hypocrites in Joseph Andrews, Fielding subscribed to the view that a humour is a deviation from a moral norm and should be exposed as such by the power of ridicule;

²³ Joseph Andrews, Preface, pp.7-8.

²⁴ 'The Covent Garden Journal', Feb.4 1752, loc.cit., p.160.

²⁵ 'The Covent Garden Journal', July 25 1752, loc.cit., pp.177-81.

but in his first novel, he also presents Parson Adams, a major character in the amiable foible tradition, who is modelled directly on Don Quixote, and in whom is embodied the moral positive which Fielding wishes to stress. The full title of Fielding's novel is The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, and of his Friend Mr Abraham Adams. Written in Imitation of the Manner of Cervantes, Author of Don Quixote, and Fielding shows his debt to Cervantes in the ways in which, in the action of the novel, the unworldly, charitable, simple, and shiningly good Adams displays eccentricities of behaviour such as absent-mindedness, has a ludicrous appearance, and is constantly made the undignified victim of disasters and violent practical jokes: he is covered in pig's blood, pushed into hog's mire, rolls down a hill, is attacked by a pack of hounds, is ducked in water, falls off his horse, and is involved in innumerable fights. Adams possesses, in the words of Fielding's description of Cervantes's hero, 'Innocence, Integrity and Honour and...the highest Benevolence' in a world which cannot appreciate such qualities. Fielding was not an uncritical admirer of Don Quixote, and he sought in Joseph Andrews to avoid what he saw as the main faults of Cervantes's novel -: the lack of coherent organisation, and the extravagance of some of the episodes involving Quixote, such as his mistakes

about windmills, wineskins and sheep²⁶:- but he was 'the first writer in England to make Don Quixote a noble symbol',²⁷ providing in Adams a mixture of the comic and the sympathetic in 'a completely new combination'.²⁸

As Corbyn Morris noted, the humorist is sometimes proud, and Fielding on several occasions exposes Adams's vanity about his learning. Adams cannot spot hypocrisy, since he simple-mindedly relies on the evidence of a person's countenance; and through his lack of experience of the world, he places too much reliance on learning as a source of experience. The landlord who exposed the False Promiser represents the experience of the world which Adams lacks; he tells Adams ' "...if you had travelled as far as I have, and conversed with the many Nations where I have traded, you would not give any Credit to a Man's Countenance. Symptoms in his Countenance, quotha! I would look there perhaps to see whether a Man had had the Small-Pox, but for nothing else!" ,²⁹

Later, Fielding describes Adams's 'Blind-side', that 'He thought a Schoolmaster the greatest

²⁶ 'The Covent Garden Journal', March 24 1752, loc. cit., pp. 192-3.

²⁷ Stuart M. Tave, The Amiable Humorist (Chicago University Press, 1960), p. 155.

²⁸ Ronald Paulson, Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth Century England (Yale University Press, 1967), p. 121.

²⁹ Joseph Andrews, Book 2, Ch. 17, p. 180.

Character in the World, and himself the greatest of all Schoolmasters',³⁰ and in other incidents in the novel, Adams shows too great a reliance on an intellectual response, rather than on one based on a natural emotion; his advice to Joseph on the loss of Fanny, that he should submissively resign himself to the event, however impeccable its religious sources, is the kind of dry intellectualism which runs counter to emotional experience;³¹ and in the episode when the drowning of his son is reported to him, Adams breaks down, unable to follow his own strict admonition.³² But usually Adams reconciles his own principles, those of the broad latitudinarian kind which stress literal charity as the greatest virtue of all, with his practice, thus distinguishing himself from the crowd of hypocrites, clergymen and laity alike, who inhabit the world of the novel.

Like Sir Roger, Adams epitomises rural unworldliness, by contrast with the artificial manners of the town; his Christianity is based on Works not Faith, and he lives the life of a poor man. Fielding locates natural goodness, as well as Christian

³⁰ Ibid., Book 3, Ch. 5, p. 232.

³¹ Ibid., Book 3, Ch. 11, pp. 264-7.

³² Ibid., Book 4, Ch. 8, pp. 308-11.

simplicity, among the poor; Joseph is helped in his condition of nakedness by a postilion '(a Lad who hath been since transported for robbing a Hen-roost)',³³ who gives him his own coat, and by the maid at the inn; and after Trulliber has refused to lend money to Adams, the 'Charity of a poor Pedlar' comes to his rescue.³⁴

Adams, then, is a figure of altogether weightier moral significance and complexity than Sir Roger, who remains a slightly patronised paragon of rural unworldliness. He is a Quixotic innocent in a world of false appearances and deceit, a man whose natural dignity remains unimpaired by the mortifications he endures; his Christianity, although it can produce excesses and absurdities, is of the latitudinarian and practically benevolent kind which shows up the hypocrisy of those who merely mouth its tenets; and he is a poor man in a world in which natural goodness is most often to be found among the poor.

That the humorous is to be found in a context of low life was noted by Aristotle³⁵ and deplored by

³³ Ibid., Book 1, Ch. 12, p. 53.

³⁴ Ibid., Book 2, Ch. 15, p. 170.

³⁵ Aristotle on the Art of Fiction: An English Translation of Aristotle's Poetics by L.J. Potts, p. 19.

Dryden; but Fielding voices what became a Romantic commonplace in his observation that it is only among the lower classes that the authentic humour of vivid individuality is to be found, and that the pressures to conform to conventional modes of behaviour which exist at the upper end of the social range do not exert their constricting force on members of the classes below them; most upper-class people

are indeed so entirely made up of form and affectation, that they have no character at all, at least, none which appears. I will venture to say the highest life is much the dullest, and affords very little humour or entertainment. The various callings in lower spheres produce the great variety of humorous characters; whereas here, except among the few who are engaged in the pursuit of ambition, and the fewer still who have a relish for pleasure, all is vanity and servile imitation. Dressing and cards, eating and drinking, bowing and curtsying, make up the business of their lives. 36

In finding natural feeling among the lower classes, Fielding looks forward to Wordsworth; in locating humour as a type of natural feeling uncorrupted by artificial manners, he looks forward, more precisely, to the treatment of humour by Scott; and in identifying those in authority with inhumanity and hypocrisy, Fielding foreshadows the kind of class feeling which went into the creation of the Wellers.

³⁶ Tom Jones (1749, Penguin English Library Edition, 1966), Book 14, Ch.1, p.657.

There is, too, in Fielding's view of humour a strain which Sterne took up and passed on to the Romantics: the idea that the humorous exposure of weaknesses and foibles draws the victim into the circle of sympathy, rather than excluding him, as a satirical approach would do; from this idea, Sterne creates the loving humorous world which Coleridge and Carlyle praised. In 'An Essay on Conversation', Fielding defines good breeding and good conversation as the art of pleasing, and of doing good to, others; and the distinction is made between railing, with its satirical associations, and raillery, a more playful, sympathetic and subtle conversational art:

The Raillery which is consistent with Good-Breeding, is a gentle Animadversion on some Foible; which while it raises a Laugh in the rest of the Company, doth not put the Person rallied out of Countenance, or expose him to Shame and Contempt. On the contrary, the Jest should be so delicate, that the Object of it should be capable of joining in the Mirth it occasions. 37

But despite important elements in his humorous sensibility which anticipate Romantic feeling, in his treatment of humorous characters in the broadest sense, Fielding brings out their didactic representativeness in a way which places him firmly in the context of the eighteenth century. He did not enjoy his humorous characters for their own sake, seeing them as illustrating the delightful individual vagaries of

37 'An Essay on Conversation' (c.1742), Miscellanies, vol. 1, p. 150.

human behaviour, as Sterne (who foreshadows the Romantics in their view of humour so much that they converted him into one of themselves) did, but as exemplifying certain kinds of conduct. The lawyer in the coach which refuses to help the naked Joseph is, as Fielding pointed out, a type; and the reactions to the sight of Joseph of the other characters are typical too. The lady prudishly refuses to travel with a naked man, the old gentleman is afraid of being robbed, the coach driver observes that Joseph has no money for his fare, but the lawyer insists that Joseph should be taken into the coach, not out of motives of compassion, but because if it were found out that they had left Joseph to die, they could be prosecuted. And if the postilion who gives his coat to Joseph exemplifies Christian charity, the passengers exemplify the selfishness and self-interest which are found wanting by reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan, the public point of reference of the incident.³⁸ Tristram Shandy is without this precise, representative didacticism; Sterne's purpose is to illuminate the variety and unpredictability of human behaviour through the light thrown by a diffused, generalised benevolence and a love for mankind which point to an irrationality which comically resists any attempts to impose preconceived notions upon human behaviour; Walter Shandy's attempts to order experience meet with ignominious failure.

³⁸ Joseph Andrews, Book I, Ch.12, pp.51-7.

In Joseph Andrews, humour takes its place in teaching us the advisability of certain kinds of conduct; in Tristram Shandy, humour is a means of perceiving total reality. Sterne does not merely give us humorous characters, but a humorous world.

3

A humorous character more like Sir Roger than the creations of Fielding or Sterne, however, is Goldsmith's Doctor Primrose, who may be briefly considered here. Like Sir Roger, he is, in the first half of the novel, a lightweight figure, a gently satirised lovable eccentric; in the second half of the novel he represents Christian submission to misfortune, and loses his humorous dimension. He is given a hobby-horse, a belief in strict monogamy; but his main characteristic is a charming rural unworldliness which gives rise to his opposition to his wife's and daughters' aspirations to the lures of fashionable life. He prevents them from walking to church in ostentatious finery, he slyly knocks over some washes being prepared as make-up by his daughters, and he is pleased when an attempt by his wife and daughters to ride to church on plough horses ends in disaster.³⁹ His initial opposition to having the family painted in an absurd

³⁹ The Vicar of Wakefield (1766), Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith, edited by Arthur Friedman (1966), vol.4, Ch.4, p.34; Ch.6, p.41; Ch.10, pp.59-60.

allegorical picture turns into approval, but this attempt to become fashionable fails, since the picture is too large to be got in through any of the doors of the house.⁴⁰ Although he has a sort of peasant slyness (he recommends lending something to a troublesome guest as a sure way of ensuring that he will not be seen again),⁴¹ he is taken in by those outside his circle; he is deceived into parting with his horse to the rogue Jenkinson, he cannot see that the 'ladies of fashion' whom the squire introduces him to are prostitutes, and his tragic sufferings spring from his inability to see that Burchell is a good man and Thornhill a villain.

Tristram Shandy is built around the contrast between the two brothers, Toby and Walter Shandy. Toby's goodness and tolerance contrast with Walter's irritability and peevishness; Toby is tongue-tied and unable to follow his brother's logical demonstrations, whereas Walter is a man of eloquence and orderly mind; Toby is obsessed with his hobby-horse, a preoccupation with battles and sieges, which springs from his inability to explain where he got his wound at the siege of Namur, but Walter embraces cranky theories about topics such as names and noses, theories by which he tries to control and order experience; Toby tries to make sense of his own experience through reconstructing the circumstances of events which he

⁴⁰ Ibid., Ch. 16, pp. 82-3.

⁴¹ Ibid., Ch. 1, p. 19.

cannot describe, first with the aid of books and maps, then through models of sieges built on his bowling green, but Walter seeks to control experience in general, through systems of words: in his own Tristrapaedia, the system of education he has devised for his son, or in the Curse of Bishop Ernulphus, which he admires because it is comprehensive, containing a curse for every occasion. But both the deductive and inductive tendencies represented by the contrast of the two brothers are continually thwarted by the ruling spirit of Sterne's comic world, the spirit of chance.

Walter's attempts to give some shape to reality meet with disaster in those very areas which he considers to be of vital importance; his horror of the name Tristram above all names cannot prevent his son, by accident, being given the name; and his belief in the importance of long noses cannot prevent Tristram's nose from being flattened at birth. Tristram supposes that a 'malignant spirit' continually thwarts his father's designs, and asks the reader's pity for this irritable Quixote who continually collides with the world at the most sensitive points of his beliefs; it is indeed sad

- to see an orderly and well-disposed gentleman, who though singular, - yet inoffensive in his notions, - so played upon in them by cross purposes; - to look down upon the stage, and see him baffled and overthrown in all his little systems and wishes; to behold a train of events

perpetually falling out against him, and in so critical and cruel a way, as if they had purposely been planned and pointed against him, merely to insult his speculations...⁴²

Toby's inductive methods are also thwarted by the operation of chance, in his case in the form of the association of ideas; if the mention of a word remotely connected with sieges should occur, this triggers off his hobby-horse, the speculations about battles, which swamp Trim's repeated attempts to tell the story of the King of Bohemia, and thwart the attempt to pin down responsibility for the accident with the sash-window. By contrast with the closed systems of Walter, Toby's hobby-horse leads to endless ramifications which stretch on to infinity as, to explain his wound, he evolves larger and larger schemes which have no logical ending. In Sterne's comic world, responsibility for the sash-window incident is impossible to fix; the accident occurred when the weights and pulleys were taken from the window to be melted down by Trim for Toby's fortifications; but Toby ordered Trim to take the metal away, because he wished to explain his wound; so whoever gave Toby his wound is responsible, or rather whoever ordered the shot to be fired which dislodged the stone which gave Toby his wound...

⁴² Tristram Shandy, vol. 1, Ch. 19, p. 82.

It was Uncle Toby who was the triumph of the book for the Romantics, since his character, seen as a growth from within, was the medium in which the sublime and the ludicrous were blended in a context of everyday life, revealing Sterne's love for the whole of creation as the main feature of his humorous sensibility. The way in which Toby's benevolence extends to the meanest part of creation is revealed in the incident in which he refuses to kill a fly:

- Go - says he, one day at dinner, to an over-grown one which had buzzed about his nose, and tormented him cruelly all dinner-time, - and which after infinite attempts, he had caught at last, as it flew by him; - I'll not hurt thee, says my uncle Toby, rising from his chair, and going across the room, with the fly in his hand, - I'll not hurt a hair of thy head: - Go, says he, lifting up the sash, and opening his hand as he spoke, to let it escape; - go, poor devil, get thee gone, why should I hurt thee? This world surely is wide enough to hold both thee and me. 43

Another occasion for the union of humour and pathos occurs when Toby utters his only oath, wrung out of him by compassion for the dying French officer Le Fever; and in an astonishing baroque flourish, Sterne describes how the Recording Angel blotted it out of his book with a tear.⁴⁴ And the novel ends with the courtship of the Widow Wadman by Toby, an episode which brings out Toby's innocence; since he attributes his own benevolent feelings to others, he

⁴³ Ibid., vol.2, Ch.12, p.131.

⁴⁴ Ibid., vol.6, Ch.8, p.411.

imagines that her anxious inquiries about the wound in his groin proceed from altruistic concern; but when Trim tactfully informs him of her real reason, his reaction is characteristically gentle: 'My uncle Toby laid down his pipe as gently upon the fender, as if it had been spun from the unravellings of a spider's web - Let us go to my brother Shandy's, said he.'⁴⁵

In Tristram Shandy, respect for individual idiosyncrasy is carried to ultimate lengths; social context has virtually disappeared as Sterne concentrates on lovingly elaborating the characters' humours and celebrating the triumph of singularity as it attempts to come to terms with the baffling nature of event and experience. All are drawn within the circle of sympathy with one exception, that of Doctor Slop, who is depicted from the outside, by a distancing, grotesque method, which points to the unattractive and unsympathetic nature of his character. In the character of Adams, Fielding presents the original Quixotic combination of innocence and idealism, now the idealism of Christian faith; but in Toby Shandy, innocence is blended with a compulsive benevolence, a softer mixture which results in pathos. A third variation is offered by Smollett, who brings together, in Matthew Bramble, the comic and the terrifying; and the grotesque element formed by this amalgamation was

⁴⁵ Ibid., vol.9, Ch.31, p.612.

more puzzling and disturbing to the Romantics than the approaches to humour of either Fielding or Sterne.

Uncle Toby's benevolence shines forth for all the world to see; the benevolence of Matthew Bramble, however, the central character of Humphry Clinker, is concealed behind a facade of peevishness and satirical railing at the affairs of a corrupted world. Bramble is a humorous type, the benevolent misanthrope, which, if taken over at all by the writers of the next century, was divested of most of the vigorous venom imparted to Smollett's treatment of the type. The psychology of the benevolent misanthrope was analysed in the person of the Man in Black, in Goldsmith's The Citizen of the World,

who seeks to conceal his feelings of natural benevolence behind a facade of ill-natured prudence; he will claim, for example, that beggars are impostors, while secretly giving them money. Educated by his father, who had preached benevolence only to become the penniless victim of flatterers, the Man in Black cultivates the character of a misanthrope to avoid being imposed upon;⁴⁶ and the same is true of Bramble. According to his nephew, Jerry Melford, Bramble

affects misanthropy, in order to conceal the sensibility of a heart, which is tender, even to a degree of weakness...His blood rises at every instance of insolence and cruelty, even

⁴⁶ The Citizen of the World (1762), Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith, edited by Arthur Friedman, vol.2, Letters 26-7, pp.108-120.

where he himself is no way concerned; and ingratitude makes his teeth chatter. On the other hand, the recital of a generous, humane, or grateful action, never fails to draw from him tears of approbation, which he is often greatly distressed to conceal. 47

Bramble's attempts to keep his generosity secret, however, often lead to awkward situations which the world, being the suspicious place it is, misinterprets; when he gives twenty pounds to a poor widow with a consumptive child, his sister Tabitha interrupts the scene and assumes the worst; and even when Jery tells her what the situation really is, she refuses to believe him, citing her knowledge of the ways of the world as evidence: ' "Child, child, talk not to me of charity.- Who gives twenty pounds in charity? - But you are a stripling - You know nothing of the world..." '48 But Bramble, as Jery's description suggested, is hyper-sensitive to a neurotic degree; he is hypochondriac, highly sensitive to sounds, smells and the physical details of life in cities, particularly Bath and London, through which he travels in the course of the novel. His vitriolic attacks on such aspects of city life as the filthy slums, the adulteration of food, and the ostentatious emulation of luxury, have a vigour which is reminiscent of that of Juvenal or Swift, and a grotesque power which lays bare the lineaments of Bramble's neurosis.

⁴⁷ Humphry Clinker (1771 , Oxford English Novels, 1966), pp.28, 67.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.22.

The jerry-building in Bath arises from 'the general tide of luxury, which hath overspread the nation, and swept away all, even the very dregs of the people';⁴⁹ and with his eye for the grotesquely vivid physical detail, Bramble observes the collapsing buildings, and the physical wrecks who swarm in the public places, adding their share to the atmosphere of decay exaggerated by Bramble's sick vision:

Going to the coffee-house one forenoon, I could not help contemplating the company, with equal surprize and compassion - We consisted of thirteen individuals; seven lamed by the gout, rheumatism, or palsy; three maimed by accident; and the rest either deaf or blind. One hobbled, another hopped, a third dragged his legs after him like a wounded snake, a fourth straddled betwixt a pair of long crutches, like the mummy of a felon hanging in chains; a fifth was bent into a horizontal position, like a mounted telescope, shoved in by a couple of chairmen; and a sixth was the bust of a man, set upright in a wheel machine, which the waiter moved from place to place. 50

Bramble is the humorist as psychological case, forced by his morbid sensitivity to recoil from crowded cities with outbursts of invective, and forced to present a misanthropic face to the world which cannot understand the simple motive behind an act of pure charity; he is a faint foreshadowing of those characters of Dickens who are twisted and warped by their environment. But Smollett lacks

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.36.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp.54-5.

Dickens's sustained power; the fascinating idea of presenting Bramble as both critical and as critic, by insisting throughout on the ambivalent value of his grotesque renderings of reality, is abandoned as the novel progresses and, unfortunately, degenerates; it was left to Dickens to work out fully in his novels the possibilities of grotesque humour.

Between Humphry Clinker and Castle Rackrent, a period of some thirty years, humorous writing fell into decline, being sustained only as coarse farce and crude satire, according to Dr J.M.S. Tompkins; some measure of this decline can be seen in the humour of Fanny Burney's Evelina (1778), with its unpleasant relish at the elaborate humiliation of Madame Duval and the foppish Lovel at the hands of the sadistic Captain Mirvan, and the account of the footrace of the two old women for a bet.⁵¹ On the other hand, writers often tended to avoid low subjects and eccentric characters, and 'from sensibility sprang that false refinement to which pictures of low life were distasteful and laughter barbarous'.⁵²

But by 1771, the foundations on which the Romantics built their edifice of humour had been laid.

⁵¹ Evelina (1778, Oxford English Novels, 1968), pp. 135-52, 399-403, 310-12.

⁵² J.M.S. Tompkins, The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800 (1932), p. 112.

Comic types, such as the Quixotic innocent, the sentimental benevolist, and the benevolent misanthrope, were ready for development by the humorous writers of the nineteenth century. The alternative humorous modes found in Fielding, the sympathetic and the satirical views, were to be developed into the polarised opposition of Scott and Austen by 1820; and both Sterne's benevolent sentiment and the grotesque mode of Smollett were to be taken up and transformed by the Romantics, finally combining in the complex tensions of Dickens's early novels. There are two immediate, main, directions which the development of the eighteenth century humorous inheritance takes in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century. The first is the Shakespearean integration of the humorous character into the social themes of the Enlightenment novels of Edgeworth, Scott, and Galt, a process which forms the subject of the next chapter; and the second is the combining of humour with a degree of scepticism, most importantly in Austen's attack on the humorous character, which is the subject of Chapter Three.

CHAPTER TWO. THE SOCIOLOGICAL USES OF HUMOUR IN
EDGEWORTH, SCOTT, AND GALT

1

In her Preface to Castle Rackrent, Maria Edgeworth defends the popular taste for anecdote, a taste which informed much of her own humorous writing, against the censure of the critic who prefers formal history as the basis of documentary record. The heroes of history, Edgeworth maintains, are remote from the sympathetic understanding of the ordinary reader, and the traditional historical account is limited, since it is the record of public appearances; whereas the real truth about character is often to be found, she argues, not in the biased and incomplete accounts of the historian, but in more informal sources, such as diaries and letters. Moreover, she goes on, it is in the doings of not only the great and important, but also of the 'worthless and insignificant', that we should be interested; the lives and actions of the former are liable to be conveyed through the artfully concealing and selective devices of the biographer, whereas the simple and impromptu style in which the ordinary person communicates his thoughts directly reveals his character for our judgement:

...the public often judiciously countenance those who, without sagacity to discriminate character, without elegance of style to

relieve the tediousness of narrative, without enlargement of mind to draw any conclusions from the facts they relate, simply pour forth anecdotes, and retail conversations, with all the minute prolixity of a gossip in a country town. ¹

Clearly, Edgeworth is more suspicious of the value of spontaneous self-revelation than Wordsworth and Scott were to be; but the significance which she was to give to ordinary life, in her humorous writing in the Irish novels, shows that she, at least in part, is moving towards what became Romantic orthodoxy about the value of ordinary life.

Her attitude to such anecdotal material is that of a documentary reporter. She tends not to transform such material by an imaginative process (with the great exception of Castle Rackrent), but to include it in the novel, often with a note reading 'Verbatim' to indicate its authenticity; Scott is the greater novelist in this respect, using his fund of anecdotal information as the raw material which is transformed as it is worked into the novel, becoming integrated into the sociological theme. Edgeworth, on the other hand, usually includes her comic characters in the novel on the basis of accurate reportage, thus making them detachable segments of the whole work.

Comic characters, incidents, and conversations in the Irish novels are often taken from the life.

¹ Castle Rackrent (1800), Tales and Novels (1857), vol.4, p.v. All further references to Edgeworth's works are to this edition.

Thady Quirk, Sir Ulick O'Shane and Corny O'Shane are based on real people; the comic coach ride in Ennui has a note reading 'Verbatim' under the postilion's remark about the wreck of a coach which is offered to Glenthorn's servants - ' "We have two more, to be sure; but one has no top, and the other no bottom. Any way there's no better can be seen than this same" ' ² - and the end of the episode is annotated with similar accounts of actual coach journeys and the remarks of postilions. This incident of the novel, vivid as it is, like the documentary humour of the other tales except Castle Rackrent, in which the imaginative transformations swamped the didactic intentions, is a detachable episode; and humour in Ennui, The Absentee, and Ormond is not the predominant method of expounding the Irish scene. Edgeworth's humour is certainly the humour of sympathy, which illuminates Irish common life; but it is limited by her notions of literal truth and by the overriding moral purpose of each of the Irish tales.

Dr Marilyn Butler, in her excellent literary biography of Maria Edgeworth, points out that the roots of her realism lie in her father's association with the Lunar *Society* (whose main interest was in the scientific solutions to industrial problems) in the late 1760s, and in his ideas on practical education,

² Ennui (1809), *ibid.*, Ch.6, p.244.

developed in the late 1770s, which put education on a scientific basis in an attempt to deal with the practical needs of actual children; through this influence Maria learned the value of accuracy of observation, which she carried into her fiction. She always equated literary truth with scientific truth, and her realism is of a literal, documentary kind, leaving no scope for imaginative transformations, but insisting on minute and pedantic exactness:

While Maria had little or no aesthetic instinct to guide her, she had the tremendous historical advantage of having been trained in facts. As a novelist she also had the room to use them. The presence of a mass of accurately observed detail in Maria's Irish novels is undoubtedly one of the factors, probably the most important factor, in making them influential. Thanks to her father's links with the vanguard of scientific empiricism, she herself became a pioneer. 3

The humour of the Irish novels is thus one element in the 'mass of accurately observed detail' which she collected in her notebooks; and the next stage in the writing of the novel was to arrange the material under different didactic headings, round which the novel was to be built. The main moral of Ennui was, she remarked, like the moral of a personal history she had heard, of 'Economy in opposition to extravagance & industry to indolence'; and the sketches

³ Maria Edgeworth, p.270.

for Ormond show the 'Prime object' of the story to be 'To shew how a person may re-educate themselves - & cure the faults of natural temper & counteract bad education & unfortunate circumstances', and there follows a list of twelve 'Secondary Objects'.⁴

The kind of humorous material which Maria and her father collected, material similar to that which appears in the Irish novels, appears in her 'Essay on Irish Bulls' of 1802, written in collaboration with her father, whose heavy hand is evident in the essay's plodding demonstrations that other people than the Irish make comic blunders in their speech, and that the speech of the lower-class Irish is often richly expressive. The best chapter is the account of 'Irish Wit and Eloquence', which contains many verbatim illustrations of the verbal manners of ordinary Irish people. The 'superfluity of wit and metaphor' which the Irish employ in their speech is illustrated and commented upon -: 'Even the cutters of turf and drawers of whiskey are orators; even the cottiers and gossoons speak in trope and figure'⁵: - a characteristic which is common to old and young alike; and a telling contrast is made between Irish eloquence when the speaker is in the grip of passion, and English incoherence and repetitiveness when the speaker is in the same state.⁶ It was to be the documentary approach

⁴ Ibid., pp.236-7.

⁵ 'An Essay on Irish Bulls' (1802), Tales and Novels, vol.4, Ch.10, p.141.

⁶ Ibid., pp.143-7.

to humour of the essay, rather than the imaginative transformations of the first Irish tale, Castle Rackrent, which was to be the approach in the humorous writing of the Irish novels as a whole.

In Castle Rackrent, however, Edgeworth put humour at the centre, and made it the main medium through which the events of the story are rendered. The account of the four inmates of Castle Rackrent is given by Thady Quirk, an old servant who has served all the four masters whose stories he tells. In this aspect, the novel is more like Galt's Annals of the Parish and The Provost than either Edgeworth's own later Irish tales, or Scott's Scottish novels; in Castle Rackrent and the Galt novels, a whole way of life of about half a century in length is sympathetically recalled through the words of a narrator who was at the centre of the events he describes. In her brief Epilogue to the novel, Edgeworth remarks that 'All the features in the foregoing sketch were taken from the life, and they are characteristic of that mixture of quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness, and blunder'⁷ which make up the Irish character; and these qualities appear in the four masters of the Castle whom Thady has served, as well as in Thady himself. A great part of the novel's humour is the presentation of

⁷ Castle Rackrent, p.63.

Thady's touching and indiscriminating devotion to each member of the Rackrent family - Sir Patrick, Sir Murtagh, Sir Kit, and Sir Condyl - whom he serves, and his consequent tendency to blame outsiders for the disasters which overtake them. He is apt to take offence at any outsider's refusal to accept eccentric treatment at the hands of one of the family; of the unfortunate wife of Sir Kit, locked in her room for seven years by her husband, Thady remarks, on her release and departure, that she had 'taken an unaccountable prejudice against the country, and everything belonging to it'.⁸ He records the outrageous behaviour, the eccentric manners, and absurdities of his masters as though they were the most natural thing in the world; he recounts how Sir Kit, when involved in a duel and observing that his opponent's wooden leg is stuck in the ground, fires over his head; how Sir Condyl tosses a coin to decide on a wife; and how Sir Condyl organises his own 'funeral', pretending to be dead so that he can hear what people are saying about him.⁹

The overall social theme of the novel is the decline of the spendthrift and reckless way of life represented by the Rackrent family; and the death of Sir Condyl, the last of the line, eventually takes place

⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 19, 27-8, 53.

in the lodge of the Castle which is now owned by Jason, Thady's lawyer son. Jason's cold calculation is contrasted with Sir Condry's reckless warmth of character, and Thady remains loyal to his master to the end, maintaining that alliance between servant and master which is the emotional basis of the story. In a way which Galt was to repeat in The Annals of the Parish and The Provost, Edgeworth conveys, in a work of astonishing originality, the operation of a social system by transforming, through the medium of a humorous narrator, an accumulation of anecdotal material. Castle Rackrent is the most modern technically of the Irish tales; for their successors Edgeworth relied on more traditional methods, insisting on an unambiguous didactic impact, and keeping the humour of documentary realism under firm control.

The moral of the next Irish tale, Ennui (one of the Tales of Fashionable Life), points out, as we noted, the dangers of extravagance and indolence, summed up in the ennui of the central character, the Earl of Glenthorn, whose idleness, marriage for money, gambling, and epicurism are described in the first five chapters of the novel. After the collapse of his marriage and his recovery, with the help of his Irish nurse, from an accident, Glenthorn decides to visit his estates in Ireland. Edgeworth can thus present her Irish material sympathetically, through the eyes of the outsider Glenthorn, with whose view the reader can identify;

and much of this Irish material is presented in a straightforward, balanced, didactic way. The character of the model agent, M'Leod, who runs the estate on the principles of Adam Smith and who makes provision for education part of his scheme, is contrasted with that of Hardcastle, another agent, who will have nothing to do with educating the common people; and the upper class Irish are represented by Lady Geraldine, who amusingly satirises English attitudes to the 'Irish savages'. Her amusing satire on her less intelligent contemporaries is good-natured; she satirises her cousin, Lord Craiglethorp, for his reserve when among the Irish, which she rightly diagnoses as typical English pride, and she mischievously feeds him false and absurd invented material for his travel book on Ireland; and her comments in general offer a comic variation on the theme of the English incomprehension of the Irish which it was the general purpose of the Irish tales to correct. Lord Glenthorn finds even her faults entertaining, as Congreve's Mirabell found those of Millamant, and Mr Knightley found those of Emma; and in the scene in which he proposes to her while they are locked in the summer-house, she deals with his effusions with just the right mixture of humorous aplomb and seriousness. Lady Geraldine, however, although good-humoured and witty much in the manner of Austen's Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, is not the main heroine of the story in which she appears; the typical Edgeworth heroine is

rather Grace Nugent of The Absentee or Florence Annaly of Ormond, women who possess what is ominously described as a 'well-regulated mind', which does not find much room for intelligence or humour, and which comes perilously close to what Austen parodied in Mary Bennet and accepted in Fanny Price. Unfortunately, after the departure of Lady Geraldine, about three-quarters of the way through, the novel degenerates into a romantic adventure story concerning a plot to kidnap Glenthorn in the rebellion of 1798, and, even more preposterously, into an account of the consequences of Glenthorn's discovery that he is not a nobleman at all, but was changed at nurse for the real Earl.

The humorous episodes of common life in Ennui are incidental and infrequent, the finest and most sustained being the set-piece description of Glenthorn's coach-ride to his castle after his arrival in Ireland, which caused Scott to laugh out loud.¹⁰ The description is based on real incidents of a similar kind, but, significantly, Edgeworth refused to have the frontispiece subject made from such an incidental episode.¹¹ The scene begins when a battered coach and a postilion are produced for the conveyance of Glenthorn's servants; when protests are made, two more horses, fresh from the plough, are added, and the

¹⁰ Ennui (1809), Tales and Novels, vol. 4, Ch. 6, pp. 243-8.

¹¹ Butler, op. cit., p. 237.

carriage races down hill dangerously, without the drag; and on arriving at a bridge the horses stop, but the servants are helpless, since they are locked in the carriage. Paddy eventually gets the coach moving, and Glenthorn's own carriage is allowed to pass, but only when he has contributed a shilling to a gang of roadmakers, who are blocking the way, ' "to drink your honour's health" '. This brief episode, which has all the vitality of Castle Rackrent, conveys to modern readers as much, or more, about Irish life than the many pages of worthy moralising which follow, and there are other, brief, touches of a similarly vividly humorous kind, such as the description of the swarm of petitioners which surrounds Glenthorn,¹² the account of Irish dilatoriness in the building of the cottage for Ellinor, the Irish servant,¹³ and the noting of the practical bull of the labourers building a fire in the hot weather to keep away the swarms of insects.¹⁴

The attempt in Ennui to survey a whole social panorama, as Scott was later to do for Scotland, is repeated in The Absentee, the novel which inspired Scott to continue with the writing of Waverley. The main didactic theme of the novel is the evils arising from absenteeism, and Edgeworth again uses the figure of the outsider, Lord Colambre, who visits

¹² Ennui, Ch.7, pp.255-6.

¹³ Ibid., Ch.8, p.260.

¹⁴ Ibid., Ch.14, p.332.

Ireland in general and his estates in particular. He meets all sections of Irish society, from high society and the country set to representatives of the middle classes and the lower classes; he visits his estates in disguise and exposes the machinations of the bad agents, the Garraghty brothers, promotes the interests of the good agent, Mr Burke, and finally persuades his father to return to Ireland to manage his estates. Like Ennui, the novel degenerates at the end into a romance plot, the attempt to establish the legitimacy of the right-thinking heroine Grace Nugent, whom Colambre marries. Edgeworth reveals a talent for social comedy in the early scene at Lady Clonbrony's gala, which is not set in Ireland; and the main lower-class documentary Irish humour of the novel is provided by Larry Brady, the postilion, who, with typical Irish eloquence, expounds the evil doings of the Garraghty brothers (whom he describes as St Dennis and Old Nick) to the disguised Colambre, and explains the various means by which the laws are dodged in that part of the country.¹⁵ Humour in the middle classes is provided by the account of the social disasters of the upstart wife of a rich grocer, Mrs Raffarty, whose ostentatious dinner is ruined by incompetent servants;¹⁶ and the impecunious Sir Terence O'Fay gives an insight into upper-class methods of keeping the duns at bay in his racy and amusing stories.¹⁷

¹⁵ The Absentee (1812), Tales and Novels, vol. 6, Ch. 10, pp. 138-48.

¹⁶ Ibid., Ch. 6, p. 90.

¹⁷ Ibid., Ch. 5, pp. 62-5.

Ennui and The Absentee look forward, in their scope, to Scott, and beyond, to the great social novels of the nineteenth century. Edgeworth does not, however, possess the complex social vision of her successors; she accurately presents the social situation, argues the problems, and offers, in her confident Enlightenment way, the solutions; such simplicity of presentation and confidence of judgement disappear after Scott, the last great Enlightenment writer. It was part of Scott's great achievement to expand the role of humour in his Scottish novels, so that it becomes a major mode of characterisation, an important element in many episodes, and, sometimes, the central imaginative method whereby the main theme of the conflict of civilisations is expounded. And it is in the first half of her last Irish tale, Ormond, that Edgeworth most closely resembles Scott in his thematic use of humour.

The main theme of Ormond is the gradual improvement of the young hero, Harry Ormond, through self-education; he 'grew up with all the faults that were incident to his natural violence of passions, and that might necessarily be expected from his neglected and deficient education'.¹⁸ He is first brought up by the worldly Sir Ulick O'Shane at Castle

¹⁸ Ormond (1817), Tales and Novels, vol.9, Ch.1, p.235. All further reference to Ormond are incorporated in the text.

Hermitage, but when he accidentally shoots an innocent man in a drunken rage, he decides to live with Ulick's cousin, Cornelius, in his island retreat; after Corny's death he comes into his inheritance, and spends some time in the Paris of before the Revolution. It is in these three worlds, the world of political jobbery and self-interest of Ulick, the world of the remote island 'kingdom' of Corny, and the fashionable world of Paris, that Harry gradually acquires his sense of truly civilised values, by moderating his own passions and by seeing each world in a proper perspective. The familiar didactic strain in Edgeworth persists in this novel, as she occasionally makes a moral point explicit; on the effect of reading Tom Jones on the hero, she comments: 'Unluckily, the easiest points to be imitated in any character are not always the best; and where any latitude is given to conscience, or any precedents are allowed to the grosser passions for their justification, those are the points which are afterwards remembered and applied in practice' (Ch.7, p.287), and the hero's improvement in the direction of self-control is generalised later in the novel: 'Resolution is a quality or power of mind totally independent of knowledge of the world. The habit of self-control can be acquired by any individual, in any situation. Ormond had practised and strengthened it, even in the retirement of the Black Islands' (Ch.19, p.399).

But alongside the didactic presentation of the hero's growth in moral feeling, Edgeworth uses humour to illuminate Harry's education, in the form of the two characters Ulick and Corny O'Shane, who dominate the first half of the novel.

Ulick stands for the Ireland of professional politics and corrupt jobbery; he has become so much part of that world that natural feeling has been replaced in him by the desire to manipulate people for his own ends and interests. He possesses 'the power of assuming whatever manner he chose' (Ch.1, p.229), and can even convincingly feign drunkenness; and he has become corrupt through constantly sacrificing his affections to the dictates of self-interest. His immersion in the infighting of political dealing results in scandals which he takes in his stride; Harry reveals his naive outlook when he fights a duel over a lampoon about Ulick. He married his third wife, who hates Ireland, for her money; and his son, Marcus, has become a cold and calculating hypocrite who also hates the Irish. Ulick's ambiguous charm is presented with sympathy, but his end is a tragically appropriate culmination of the course of his life; he dies in debt, under suspicion of having defrauded Harry of his inherited money.

By contrast, Corny is cut off, literally and intellectually, from the world of urban, civilised Ireland. He runs a virtually feudal 'kingdom' on a

group of islands, and he spends his time hunting, fishing, and drinking with his entourage of faithful peasants and a Catholic priest, Father Jos; he is loved by his dependents, and his funeral, unlike that of Ulick, is in the grand style of Irish wakes. Although Ulick is part of the world of civilised values, he has lost his integrity and succumbed, in the sordid scramble for personal gain, to the worst side of the world's values; but whereas Corny is content in his island world, his qualities and potentialities are wasted in the remote fastness of the islands: 'He was indeed a man of great natural powers, both of body and mind - of inventive genius, energy, and perseverance, which might have attained the greatest objects; though from insufficient knowledge, and self-sufficient perversity, they had wasted themselves on absurd or trivial purposes' (Ch.5, p.269).

The values which Ulick and Corny represent are central in the formation of Harry's character as the process of his education continues; ideally, he must acquire Ulick's poise and polish without his hypocrisy and self-seeking, and Corny's warmth and personal feeling without the kind of intemperate excess resulting from passion. Corny at one point argues for passion, a natural and healthy emotion to be cultivated, as against Ulick's controlled hypocrisy and the sort of 'Methodism' which seeks to control the expression of natural passion (Ch.7, p.283). This advice, in the moral scheme of Harry's development,

is of limited value; whereas hypocrisy is clearly to be avoided, Harry must curb that natural passion which causes harm to others; he refuses to drink to excess at one of Corny's huge feasts, and although Corny is at first furious, he later realises that Harry's quest for improvement is genuine and necessary (Ch.4, pp.262-4).

Ulick and Corny are of great importance in the exposition of the theme of the education of the hero, but they are not limited, as the other characters are, by the didactic nature of their function in the novel; they are considerable humorous characters in their own right, and their portrayal makes vivid the theme of the conflict of the two types of civilisation which they represent. This conflict is best brought out in the account of their conversation on the occasion of Ulick's visit to Corny on the island, in which their mutual hostility emerges in a succession of sly, needling exchanges. Of the two, Corny is the more acute, and he explains his cousin's weakness to Father Jos, which is that Ulick unwittingly reveals his real design when he thinks that he is being most cunning; as Corny puts it, "he woodcocks - hides his head, and forgets his body can be seen" (Ch.6,p.272), and their dialogue is compared to a contest between one who wields a tomahawk and one who wields a sword. Ulick and Corny are not of the major comic stature of Jarvie and Bradwardine; there is rather too much moral significance and not enough independent life in

them; but when they disappear from the scene (Corny dies half-way through the novel in a shooting accident), the didactic presentation of the remaining Irish scenes and the scenes in Paris comes as an anti-climax. But throughout the cold politeness of the fashionable scenes, we remember Corny's definition of politeness, ' "that politeness of the heart, which respects and sympathizes with the feelings of others" '(Ch.15,p.354), which became a central value of Scott's humour as well as Edgeworth's.

2

It was the novels of Edgeworth which provided the immediate impetus behind the series of novels dealing with the history of Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which started with Waverley in 1814; but it is not mainly to the novels of Edgeworth, or, indeed, to the novels of his eighteenth century predecessors, that Scott owes the imaginative qualities of the Scottish novels. It is to two other sources that we must turn in order to discover the complete origins of the imaginative flesh with which Scott clothed Edgeworth's skeleton: the plays of Shakespeare and the writings of the Scottish historians of the Enlightenment.

There are incidents and scenes in Scott's novels for which there was no precedent in fiction, and to which the adjective 'Shakespearean' may be justly

applied. In the description of the mob in the opening scenes of The Heart of Mid-Lothian, Scott shows a grasp of crowd psychology unprecedented since Shakespeare; and he has, too, the Shakespearean ability to crystallise the central theme of a work in a single great scene. Such scenes are the discovery of the Jacobites' plot at the end of Redgauntlet, in which the forces of modern reality finally overwhelm the forces of romance, and the trial of Evan Dhu at the end of Waverley, in which the honour of the clan system is pitted against the power of Saxon law. In the treatment of the humorous characters, too, Scott reveals a Shakespearean sensibility.

The ways in which Scott's major comic characters embody, in a Shakespearean way, the kinds of sociological and historical themes which were also treated by the historians of the Enlightenment, will form the main discussion of this chapter; but in the treatment of his minor comic characters, too, Scott often shows a Shakespearean dimension. At the opening of Old Mortality we meet the landlord, Niel Blane, who must be diplomatic at a politically delicate time, since his customers span such a wide range of political and religious persuasions. The advice he offers to his daughter on the running of the house is a model of humorous self-interest and caution, and it perfectly suggests the nature of the ideological climate which will be at the centre of the novel's historical concern:

!...when the malt begins to get aboon the meal, they'll begin to speak about government in kirk and state, and then, Jenny, they are like to quarrel - Let them be doing - anger's a drouthy passion, and the mair they dispute, the mair ale they'll drink; but ye were best serve them wi' a pint o' the sma' browst - it will heat them less, and they'll never ken the difference! 19

Niel Blane represents a perfect balance between an individual, with all his peculiarities and oddities, and a representative example of an historical phenomenon, as do all Scott's great humorous characters, and as does another minor character caught between two opposing forces, Provost Crosbie of Redgauntlet, whose Jacobite connexions surface at a politically embarrassing time. Despite his public protestations of loyalty to Hanover, he has Jacobite friends, and his wife is related to a notorious participant in the '45, Maxwell of Summertrees; and it is suspected that he dare not repeat the anti-Pretender harangues of the Council Chamber in the privacy of his own home; but Maxwell maintains that Crosbie is such a good Provost precisely because nobody knows whether he is a Whig or a Tory. In these instances, Scott's use of humorous characters to underpin his themes resembles Shakespeare's treatment of the gravediggers in Hamlet and the porter in Macbeth. It is this imaginative integration

¹⁹ Old Mortality (1816), The Waverley Novels, vol. 3, Ch. 3, p. 45.

of characters into the thematic structure of the work which Edgeworth, except in Castle Rackrent, was incapable of making.

Grafted onto Scott's humorous sensibility, too, are such influences of the native Scottish tradition as emerge in 'Wandering Willie's Tale' in Redgauntlet. This story is as perfect a humorous tale as 'The Two Drovers' is a serious tale; as a ghost story, it brilliantly exploits the ambiguous region between the natural and the supernatural, suggesting a comparison with Burns's brilliant 'Tam O'Shanter'; and it also tells, in miniature, an entire chapter of Scottish history at the turn of the seventeenth century. Told by Willie in his native dialect, it opens with a brilliant account of the murderous persecutions of Sir Robert Redgauntlet in the days of his anti-Covenanter activities:

Glen, nor dargle, nor mountain, nor cave, could
hide the puir hill-folk when Redgauntlet was out
with bugle and bloodhound after them, as if
they had been sae mony deer. And troth when
they fand them, they didna mak muckle mair
ceremony than a Hielandman wi' a roebuck, -
It was just, 'Will ye tak the test?' - if not -
'Make ready - present - fire!' and there lay
the recusant.

In the less fanatical times which followed,
Sir Robert was left in peace, since 'there were
ower mony great folks dipped in the same doings, to
mak a spick and span new warld'; and after the death

of Sir Robert, his son embodies a more accommodating style of power:

Sir John and his father never gree'd weel.
Sir John had been bred an advocate, and
afterwards sat in the last Scots Parliament
and voted for the Union, having gotten, it
was thought, a rug of the compensations -
if his father could have come out of his
grave, he would have brained him for it on
his awn hearthstane. 20

Against this historical background Willie tells the story of his grandfather, who, in a ghostly encounter with his dead master, tries to recover the rent receipt which will prove to Sir John that he paid his rent to Sir Robert just before his death; and at the place where he finds Sir Robert's spirit are assembled the ghosts of all the persecutors of the Covenanters, among them Lauderdale, Dalrymple, and Claverhouse. In this anecdote, a masterpiece of the Scottish macabre grotesque, Scott demonstrates, on a small scale, the same grasp of historical developments as he shows on the large canvases of his Scottish novels; and it may have been of a story such as this that Henry Cockburn was thinking when he characterised Scott's talk in his Memorials: 'No bad idea will be formed of Scott's conversation by supposing one of his Scotch novels to be cut into talk. It is not so much conversation as a joyous flow of anecdote, story, character, and scene,

20 'Wandering Willie's Tale', Redgauntlet (1824), The Waverley novels, vol. 9, pp. 113, 114, 117.

mostly humorous, always graphic, and never personal or ill natured.' ²¹

The precise extent of the influence of Scottish historians of the eighteenth century on Scott is, according to Dr P.D. Garside, the historian of Scott's intellectual background, obscure; yet Scott's general approach to history has much in common with that of Scottish Enlightenment historians. A writer such as Adam Ferguson was interested in tracing the development of man in society in terms of a progressive movement, from a state of 'rudeness' to a state of 'polish', often by comparing different societies at different stages of development. This comparison was based on the fundamental confidence that 'there is a principle at work in the affairs of men which brings progress, a confidence resting not only on his generalisations from history, but on his belief that man has, even within himself, such a principle which leads him towards perfecting himself and his institutions'. ²²

In his chapter on the 'Progress of Civilisation in Society' in Tales of a Grandfather, Scott shows his affinities with the Scottish eighteenth century tradition of deterministic sociological writing;

²¹ Henry Cockburn, Memorials of his Time (1856), p.454.

²² Gladys Bryson, Man and Society: The Scottish Enquiry of the Eighteenth Century (Princeton University Press, 1945), p.101.

starting with a comparison between the animals and man to demonstrate the superiority of the latter, Scott shows how society becomes more complex and structured as the population grows, money replaces a barter economy, trade increases, and inventions like printing make their impact; and each development contributes to society's progress from barbarism to civilisation: 'Thus, the progress of human society, unless it is interrupted by some unfortunate circumstances, continues to advance, and every new generation, without losing any of the advantages already attained, goes on to acquire others which were unknown to the preceding one' ²³

As a novelist, Scott was interested in analysing the moral consequences of the kind of progressive development which, on the whole, he approved of, and these consequences are seen in operation, in the Scottish novels, in a comparative situation; two kinds of societies, two kinds of political and religious thinking, are opposed, and out of the conflict there emerges the moral debate and the judicious conclusion. The Scotland of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offered the kind of laboratory in which the Gemeinschaft of the feudal Highland clans could be juxtaposed

²³ Tales of a Grandfather (1829), Second Series (1923), vol. 2, pp. 10-11.

with the Gesellschaft of the commercial Lowlands, as the environment in which the central moral question of Scott's historical novels could be posed: how is it possible to adapt oneself honourably to the process of inevitable change?

There are sections of Scott's writing in which, in general terms, he writes about civilisation and historical change in the manner of an Enlightenment historian. In Chapter 15 of A Legend of Montrose there is a long analysis of recent developments in professional armies, and the point is developed that in the 1640s the Highlands were still warlike in character, whereas the Lowlands were unfitted for war through their cultivation of the arts of peace; in Chapter 11 of The Bride of Lammermoor there is a discussion of the recent change in the feudal relationship between the Laird and the inhabitants of the village of Wolf's Hope; and in The Heart of Mid-Lothian, Scott sets out the advantages possessed by those living in a rural environment:

their ancestors have more seldom changed their place of residence; their mutual recollection of remarkable objects is more accurate; the high and the low are more interested in each other's welfare; the feelings of kindred and relationship are more widely extended, and in a word, the bonds of patriotic affection, always honourable even when a little too exclusively strained, have more influence on men's feelings and actions. 24

²⁴ The Heart of Mid-Lothian (1818), Waverley Novels, vol.4, Ch.37, p.396.

The most straightforward way in which Scott indicates the necessary adjustments between two kinds of civilisations is by way of the heroes of the novels, who stand for the kind of moderation and compromise which have Scott's intellectual approval. They are simple, Edgeworthian figures; their status as outsiders gives them an objective, balanced view of the issues, a view which involves Scott's rational agreement rather than his imaginative assent. A typical hero is Edward Morton of Old Mortality, whose moderation has its origins in a just and balanced assessment of the excesses of both the Covenanting and the Government sides:

He had formed few congenial ties with those who were the objects of persecution, and was disgusted alike by their narrowminded and selfish party-spirit, their gloomy fanaticism, their abhorrent condemnation of all elegant studies or innocent exercises, and the envenomed rancour of their political hatred. But his mind was still more revolted by the tyrannical and oppressive conduct of the Government - the misrule, license, and brutality of the soldiery - the executions on the scaffold, the slaughters in the open field, the free quarters and exactions imposed by military law, which placed the lives and fortunes of a free people on a level with Asiatic slaves. 25

But it was not in the heroes that Scott embodies most vividly the central cultural issues of his Scottish novels, but in the humorous characters; and the following discussion will bring

²⁵ Old Mortality, The Waverley Novels, vol. 3, Ch. 12, p. 142.

out the ways in which Dalgetty, Bradwardine, Cuddie Headrigg, and Jarvie embody Scott's central concerns in ways which can be compared with the sensibility of Shakespeare.

Scott takes as the subject of A Legend of Montrose the changing nature of warfare in the middle of the seventeenth century, by contrasting the old system of feudal loyalty as represented by the clan system with the new mercenary system of hiring one's services as a soldier to the highest bidder. The representative of the new system is the hero of the story, Dalgetty, whose mercenary experience in the Thirty Years' War is the main subject of his conversation. Like the Enlightenment historians, Scott saw warfare as an important test of the quality of a civilisation; and there is a great deal of openly sociological analysis worked into the story. Scott discusses the relative states of preparedness for war of the Highlands and the Lowlands, and examines the related questions of the strengths and weaknesses of Highland troops (they are loyal to their own leaders but find it difficult to accept the conditions of overall command by a stranger, and tend to disperse to their homes at the end of a battle or when the action moves too far away from their own territory), and the kinds of historical pressures which account for Montrose's decision to attack Argyle rather than to march on Edinburgh. All these issues complement the issue

at the heart of the analysis: the impact of the attitudes towards war of Dalgetty himself. He is, according to Anderson, ' "a man of the times" ',²⁶ without whom it would be impossible to prosecute the war; he has no loyalty, according to Menteith, and knows neither honour or principle, being merely a hired gladiator; Montrose contrasts Menteith's generous, romantic, disinterested chivalry with the sordid mercenary spirit, and remarks on the convenience of commanding someone whose motives are so straightforward.²⁷

Dalgetty himself is presented, against this background of analysis and attitudes, with great sympathy. He is basically the Scottish pedant type, immensely proud of his knowledge and experience of war; he has a grasp of military matters which he insists on imparting whatever the occasion, and his advice to the dour Sir Duncan Campbell on how to improve the fortifications of his castle produces some of the finest humour of the story. In his usual balanced and judicious way, Scott can see the calculating side to Dalgetty; nevertheless, the old chivalric system is seen to be out of date and to possess weaknesses; and Dalgetty, while far from despising the honour to be gained from warfare, considers it only sensible to make definite arrangements about pay first, since, as a mercenary, he has to provide his own equipment.

²⁶ A Legend of Montrose (1819), The Waverley Novels, vol. 3, Ch. 6, p. 64.

²⁷ Ibid., Ch. 20, p. 195.

Dalgetty stands for the modern, professional attitude to war which is triumphing over a feudal system based on making strategic decisions on a personal basis rather than according to objective strategic opportunities, as when Montrose decides to attack Argyle and not the Lowlands. Dalgetty is not only a man of the present, but a man of the future, a representative of the middle class professional. But despite his great confidence, he is sometimes out of his depth; when he tries to negotiate wild Highland country, he finds his armour and weapons useless, and has to admit the superior effectiveness of Highlanders' bows and arrows; and combined with his arrogance is a worldly prudence at mealtimes, when he eats as much as possible, since he does not know where the next meal is coming from.

In A Legend of Montrose we can see, on a small scale, the qualities which made Scott a great historical novelist: the confident grasp of broad historical and cultural issues, the judicious weighing and balancing of the strengths and weaknesses of the systems of society whose qualities he is considering, and the integration of character and theme, here unusual in that the comic character and hero are the same. These qualities are also displayed on the larger canvases of Waverley, Old Mortality, and Rob Roy, but here the hero and the humorous characters are separate; and it is to the latter we must turn for an assessment of the nature

of Scott's deepest imaginative insights.

The humour of Old Mortality and Rob Roy resides largely in the humorous characters of Cuddie and his mother, and in Bailie Jarvie; there is no comic character of quite this stature and weight in Waverley, a novel in which humour is more generally diffused over the work as a whole. The central theme of the novel is the moral education of the hero, Edward Waverley, through his experiences, which, like those of Harry Ormond, enable him to adjust his personality to the realities of the world in which he lives. The key-word of the novel is 'romantic', used in the derogatory sense of 'dreamy'; Edward's education, guided by nothing but his own whims and caprices, a course of desultory 'idle reading', threatens to endanger any accommodation with reality, since it raised his imagination to a pre-eminent place, making him a 'romantic visionary' in an 'ideal world'.²⁸ Edward's acquisition of the necessary sense of moral awareness is usually conveyed by Scott as a serious enterprise; the hero's remorse for Houghton's death and his concern for Talbot's unborn child are central and serious moral issues. But in his treatment of the stages of Edward's education, Scott frequently uses humour to undercut the romantic ideas which Edward has of the context in

²⁸ Waverley (1814), The Waverley Novels, vol.1, Ch.4, pp.36-41. All further references to Waverley are incorporated into the text.

which he finds himself, ideas which the events in the Highlands seem to encourage; the raids from the Highlands into Tully resemble the stories of Edward's day-dreams. Examples of the light touch of Scott's humour multiply when Edward starts his expedition into the mountains with Evan, an expedition into romantic regions with the prosaic purpose of recovering the Baron's cows. Evan, on leading Edward into the mountains, displays his marksmanship by shooting at an eagle, but misses; Flora's carefully staged romantic song is followed by Cathleen's burlesque song about a cow; and the awesome caves and firelit stronghold of Bean Lean lead Edward to expect to meet a leader of terrifying appearance, but Donald turns out to be a small man, wearing a French uniform and a feathered hat, 'in which he was far from showing to advantage, and indeed looked so incongruous, compared with all around him, that Waverley would have been tempted to laugh, had laughter been either civil or safe' (Ch.17, p.120).

The use of anti-climax to comically undercut a romantic vision of the Highlands and its inhabitants is perhaps at its finest in a comment about the death of Fergus. After the great trial scene, in which the heroism and the willingness to sacrifice his own life in the place of that of his chief made Evan the central figure and the embodiment of a

civilised code of behaviour incomprehensible to the Saxon lawyers, Fergus and his associates are beheaded, and their heads are placed on the Scotch Gate, on which Alick Polwarth, an ordinary soldier, has this comment: ' "It's a great pity of Evan Dhu, who was a very weel-meaning, good-natured man, to be a Heilandman; and indeed so was the Laird o' Glennaquoich too, for that matter, when he wasna in ane o' his tirrivies" ' (Ch.69, p.434). By this wryly humorous comment, the character and achievement of Fergus are suddenly placed in a new perspective; his undoubted courage, the passion and ambition of the man on behalf of his desperate cause, are seen as 'tirrivies', the tantrums of a spoiled child; in Alick's comment, tragedy and comedy merge together to suggest the notions that Fergus's behaviour was vanity, in the Biblical sense, and that this is how the popular memory will remember him, just as the middle-class memory of him will be as he is commemorated in the romantic painting hung at Tully.

In his treatment of the battle of Preston, too, an essentially serious affair, shameful for the English forces and tragic in the death of Gardiner, Scott uses humour, which adds greater depth to his description. Before the battle, Waverley, Bradwardine, Evan, Fergus, and Duncan Macwheeble, the Baron's steward, are assembled at Mrs Flockhart's establishment, and the talk turns to their possible

fate in the coming battle; when Bradwardine thinks of the potential unprotected state of Rose, he asks Macwheeble to look after her, at which tears come to the eyes of the steward: 'The Bailie was a man of earthly mould after all; a good deal of dirt and dross about him, undoubtedly, but some kindly and just feelings he had, especially where the Baron or his young mistress were concerned'. But as the Bailie begins to talk of Rose, his normal character as a careful, precise civil servant asserts itself, as he moves irresistibly into enumerating a catalogue of her property, indignantly ending by envisaging his own post being taken over by a stranger; on this surfacing of self-interest through the opening wash of sentiment, Scott comments that 'The beginning of this lamentation really had something affecting, but the conclusion rendered laughter irresistible', and the laughter is the laughter of sympathy at the reassertion of the Bailie's humour, binding together the circle of friends more tightly. (Ch.42, p.277)

The most remarkable example of humour in the description of the battle is in the account of the death of the cloddish Balmawhapple, who is killed by a party of dragoons whom he had impetuously chased too far from the scene of battle; the dragoons, seeing that they outnumbered Balmawhapple's party, 'turned round, and, cleaving his skull with their broadswords, satisfied the world that the unfortunate gentleman had actually brains, the end of his life thus giving

proof of a fact generally doubted during its progress'. The formal elegy is pronounced by Lieutenant Jinker, who emphasises the pigheadedness for which the Laird was known in his life; and he is careful to 'exculpate his favourite mare from any share in contributing to the catastrophe' (Ch.47, p.306).

The other humorous touches involve the Baron Bradwardine who, with Davie Gellatley, is the main humorous character in the novel as a whole and, although not conceived on the scale of Cuddie Headrigg or Jarvie, embodies important themes in the novel. The Baron is seen reading the Evening Service to the assembled troops on the night before the battle; his appearance is rather ludicrous (Scott mentions his spectacles in this connexion), but, in a touching way, this adds to the solemnity of the scene; and he is seen in fine pedantic flow after the battle, in his long defence of his right to remove the Chevalier's boots.

The most important humorous elements of the novel are the characters of Davie and the Baron, and the relationship between them. Davie's character is a combination of the characteristics of Wordsworth's idiot boy (Scott quotes from Wordsworth's poem to illustrate Janet's love for her son (Ch.64,p.398)) and the fool in King Lear. He is a simpleton who

has been permanently affected by the death of his musically talented younger brother; the songs he sings are a kind of tribute to his brother's memory. In this guise he represents that sympathetic feeling for the simple-minded which was also part of Wordsworth's Romantic programme; but the pathos is blended with a satirical element in his character, by which he is able to make judgements of great acuteness, a faculty which Scott's imaginative tact prevents him from overdoing. Davie describes Macwheeble's devotion to the authority which happens to be in power at the time in terms of his flexible conscience; the Bailie is ' a particularly good man, who had a very quiet and peaceful conscience, that never did him any harm '(Ch.11, p.75), and in reply to Macwheeble's prediction that the Laird of Balmawhapple will eventually forsake light company (' "he'll mend, he'll mend" '), Davie murmurs, ' "Like sour ale in simmer" ' (Ch.14,p.101). Scott's combination of the pathetic and the satirical in the character of Davie deliberately excludes any harsh grotesque dimension of the kind which we find in Smollett's presentation of Humphry Clinker; and in the portrayal of Bradwardine as basically the Scottish pedantic type, the kind of grotesque history, appearance, and mode of utterance which Smollett gives to Lismahago is, again, entirely absent in the Scott rendering of the character. This deliberate exclusion of the grotesque, the

harsh, the violent, and the macabre in the presentation of comic types is a general feature of Scott's humorous writing, in which the types he took over from the previous century are invariably softened in outline by the warmth of his Romantic sensibility; even the benevolent misanthrope has been softened into the character of Oldbuck. In his portrait of the Baron, Scott suggests a blending of the rational and the romantic elements which embody the main theme of the novel: the clash between the romantic Stuart cause, for which Scott had a great deal of sympathy, and the realisation that the world was passing into the hands of unromantic and rational types. The Baron is a dry, pedantic man who believes that history is a dusty collection of facts; yet his rationalism, which is also expressed in his refusal to entertain superstitious notions about witches, co-exists with a fund of sentimental feeling in his devotion to that most romantic of causes, the restoration of the Stuarts.

But it is not so much in his treatment of this main political issue that Scott reveals his love for an institution which was becoming part of the past, but rather in his treatment of the relationship between the Baron and Davie, based, indeed, on a system of feudal dependence, but having its real centre in a mutual feeling of love and respect. The Baron had demonstrated his concern for the Gellatleys when he

had attended an examination of Janet by the Whig leaders on a charge of witchcraft; and when the Baron's fortunes fall, she repays him by hiding him in her cottage at Tully; and on one occasion, Davie saves the Baron's life by substituting himself for the Baron who had been spotted by English soldiers. The Baron's foibles, comments Scott, 'seemed foils to set off the disinterestedness of his disposition, the genuine goodness of his heart, and his unshaken courage' (Ch.63, p.389), and it is this last quality which the Baron reveals when his fortunes are at their lowest ebb. As he crawls into his cave at Tully where he is being protected after the collapse of the Stuart cause, his stoicism reaches sublime heights in his speech in which the pedantic Christian (comparing the cave to Patmos) and classical ('Fuimus Troes' - we are Trojans no longer) references are both apposite and moving in their breadth of application (Ch.65, p.402).

This dimension of sublimity is one with which Scott often invests his humorous characters, further extending their range beyond anything previously attempted. Fielding's Parson Adams, indeed, frequently has a dignity of utterance, but it contributes to the Christian element of the work as a whole, offering relief from, and a contrast with, his ludicrous discomfiture; but the humorous character in Scott does not, as it were, switch from

one mode to the other. Here the sublimity is seen as at once compatible with and proceeding from the other, lowlier, more ludicrous elements in the character, and, at the same time, as profoundly coextensive with those kinds of elementary social feelings which Scott was most anxious to define and, along with Wordsworth, to commend. When, in The Antiquary, the benevolent misanthrope Oldbuck instinctively takes the head of the funeral procession of young Steenie Mucklebackit, drowned at sea, since his father cannot face the prospect, the sublimity with which he is invested by his act confirms the deep-rooted relationship between himself as Laird and the community over which he presides:

The coffin, covered with a pall, and supported upon handspikes by the nearest relatives, now only waited the father to support the head, as is customary. Two or three of these privileged persons spoke to him, but he only answered by shaking his hand and his head in token of refusal. With better intention than judgement, the friends, who considered this as an act of duty on the part of the living, and of decency towards the deceased, would have proceeded to enforce their request, had not Oldbuck interfered between the distressed father and his well-meaning tormentors, and informed them, that he himself, as landlord and master to the deceased, 'would carry his head to the grave.' In spite of the sorrowful occasion, the hearts of the relatives swelled within them at so marked a distinction on the part of the laird; and old Alison Breck, who was present among other fish-women, swore almost aloud, 'His honour Monkbarns should never want sax warp of oysters in the season' (of which fish he was understood to be fond), 'if she should gang to sea and dredge for them hersell, in the foulest wind that ever blew!' And such is the temper of the Scottish common people, that, by this instance of compliance with their customs,

and respect for their persons, Mr Oldbuck gained more popularity than by all the sums which he had yearly distributed in the parish for purposes of private or general charity. 29

There is a similar moment in Old Mortality, in which a sublime utterance from a comic character embodies a key social theme of the work; this is Mause Headrigg's address to Claverhouse after the battle of Drumclog. Mause has been presented up to this point as a mainly comic figure, a shrewish, fanatical Covenanter whose unbridled tongue and rigid religious views have been responsible for the dismissal of herself and her dominated son, Cuddie, from two places of work; despite Cuddie's efforts to persuade her to hold her tongue, and despite his own desire for a quiet life, she comically allows nothing to stand in the way of the expression of her views. When she is dismissed from the service of Lady Margaret because she has defied her order that Cuddie should attend the celebrations with which the novel opens, Scott suggests that, through the comic ranting of the shrew, there comes the kind of dignity which conveys the moving and appealing sincerity of a persecuted social group; Mause assures Lady Margaret that she has her good wishes, but "I canna prefer the commands of an earthly mistress to those of a heavenly master, and sae I am e'en ready to suffer for

²⁹ The Antiquary (1816), The Waverley Novels, vol.2, Ch.31, p.297.

righteousness' sake". ' 30

This sublime strain reaches its greatest expression in her address to Claverhouse after his defeat at Drumclog, in which her fanaticism, no longer the basis of a comic relationship between herself and her put-upon son, is the basis of the case against the persecutors, reminding us that Mause and people like her were the victims of persecution only because they demanded freedom of worship:

She soon discovered Claverhouse at the head of the fugitive party, and exclaimed with bitter irony, 'Tarry, tarry, ye wha were aye sae blithe to be at the meetings of the saints, and wad ride every muir in Scotland to find a conventicle! Wilt thou not tarry, now thou hast found ane? Wilt thou not stay for one word mair? Wilt thou na bide the afternoon preaching? - Wea betide ye!' she said, suddenly changing her tone, 'and cut the houghs of the creature whase fleetness ye trust in! - Sheugh! sheugh! - awa wi ye, that hae spilled sae muckle blude, and now wad save your ain! - awa wi' ye for a railing Rabshakeh, a cursing Shimei, a bloodthirsty Doeg! - The sword's drawn now that winna be lang o'ertaking ye, ride as fast as ye will.' 31

Scott had a great deal of sympathy for Claverhouse, but such was the breadth of his mind that he could see the perfect justice of the cause of the fanatical Covenanters, whose extremism he disliked and whose

³⁰ Old Mortality, The Waverley Novels, vol. 3, Ch. 6, p. 77.

³¹ Ibid., Ch. 16, pp. 184-5.

discourse, like they themselves, he described as capable of moving from the 'sublime' to the 'burlesque'.³² The right of ordinary people to live their own lives without interference from authority in matters of conscience is finely expressed, in a serious way, in the epic simplicity of the story of her sufferings at the hands of government troops by the blind Bessie Maclure; and the finest embodiment of this principle in the novel in comic terms is Cuddie himself.

Just as Mause is not merely a comic shrew, so her son is not merely a temporising trimmer; like Jarvie, he has reserves of courage, revealed in the incident when he is the means whereby Morton is rescued from the hands of murderous Covenanters, thus earning the praise of Claverhouse himself. Cuddie's action is the final point of reference in a conversation between Morton and Claverhouse on the topic of the right of common people to freedom of worship. Morton, who has joined the Covenanting side because he believes it is wrong to persecute people for their beliefs, and in the hope that moderation will prevail, acutely compares Claverhouse's character with that of Burley, the Covenanters' leader, on the grounds of their mutual fanaticism; Claverhouse, admitting that he is a fanatic, supports

³² Ibid., Ch.17, p.190.

the fanaticism of 'honour' as against that of 'dark and sullen superstition'. When Morton points out that both leaders shed blood, Claverhouse replies, ' "Surely...but of what kind? - There is a difference, I trust, between the blood of learned and reverend prelates and scholars, of gallant soldiers and noble gentlemen, and the red puddle that stagnates in the veins of psalm-singing mechanics, crack-brained demagogues, and silly boors". ' Morton, pointing out that God gives life to everyone, picks up Claverhouse's previous remark about ' "sweeping from the face of the earth some few hundreds of villain churls, who are born but to plough it" ', remarking that it was a ploughman, Cuddie, who went to Claverhouse, and thus was responsible for Morton's rescue from the fanatics. Claverhouse replies that ' "Faithful and true are words never thrown away upon me, Mr Morton. You may depend on the young man's safety". ' 33

Not only is Cuddie the final point of reference in this speech, but he is, too, like Dalgetty, a man of the future, a future in which tolerance will conquer the kinds of rigidity of thought and political action which the novel analyses. In Old Mortality, we see the process whereby the fanatic is destroyed by his rigidity, and those survive who can accommodate

³³ Ibid., Ch. 34, pp. 327-9.

themselves to the changing situation with integrity and honour: Morton himself, and Cuddie. Cuddie's finest moment is at his examination before his brutal inquisitors, among whom are Lauderdale and Dalrymple, when his display of natural peasant caution is both supremely funny and profoundly indicative of the way in which society is moving. When asked if he was at Bothwell Brigg, he prevaricates, finally stating that ' "since naethingelse will please ye, write down that I canna deny but I was there" '; and he promises to accept the King's pardon and to go to church, ' "and drink his health into the bargain, when the ale's gude".' ³⁴

Of all the Scottish novels, it is perhaps Rob Roy in which Scott most successfully embodies his sociological themes in a major comic character. His main theme in this novel is the contrast between the urban civilisation of Glasgow, dependent on trade for its prosperity and on a clearly-defined system of law for its security, and the rural civilisation of the Highlands, which functions through unwritten laws of loyalty to the clan and the chief. In his treatment of this comparative theme, Scott is far from equating the Highlands with 'barbarism' and the Lowlands with 'civilisation'; the judicious balancing and weighing of strengths and weaknesses of different kinds of social organisation is apparent in this novel too.

³⁴ Ibid., Ch. 35, p. 337.

This balance is achieved largely through the presentation of the character of Bailie Jarvie, the self-important Glasgow merchant and magistrate, with an interest in preserving commercial prosperity and legality, but who is also the kinsman of Rob Roy, the Highlander, who, through economic disaster, has turned from droving cattle to levying blackmail. This connexion is the source of much embarrassment to Jarvie, who fears for his reputation in the town if his enemies ever get to hear of it; but he also admits a feeling of sympathy towards the Highland life, in a conflict of loyalties which reveals that, although he is Glasgow on top, he is Highland underneath. He remarks to Frank:

' It's a queer thing o' me,...that am a man o' peace mysell, and a peacefu' man's son - for the deacon my father quarrelled wi' nane out o' the town-council - it's a queer thing, I say, but I think the Hieland blude o' me warms at thae daft tales, and whiles I like better to hear them than a word o' profit, gude forgie me! But they are vanities - sinfu' vanities - and, moreover, again the statute law - again the statute and gospel law! 35

Sometimes Scott will emphasise the clash of the two societies in terms of a clash of customs, in the incident at the end of Jarvie's sojourn in the Highlands, when Jarvie, having been repaid by Rob, wants the signature of two witnesses to the discharge of the debt; but this modern, bourgeois need for a

³⁵ Rob Roy (1818), The Waverley Novels, vol.2, Ch.26, p.296.

written contract is repudiated by Rob, who throws the document on the fire, since he lives in a different kind of society: ' "That's a Hieland settlement of accounts. The time might come, cousin, were I to keep a' these charges and discharges, that friends might be brought into trouble for having dealt with me".' ³⁶

In the first encounter, in Chapter 23, between Jarvie and Rob in the jail at Glasgow, Scott sets out the characters of the two men as the representatives of two kinds of civilisation; Rob's pride in his Highland birth and his contempt for spinners and weavers contrast with Jarvie's pride in commercial Glasgow and his contempt for Highland lawlessness. But, as his journey into the Highlands reveals, Jarvie is neither ignorant of Highland ways nor is he unsympathetic to the misfortune which led Rob to become an outlaw; and Jarvie is the means whereby our sympathy and understanding are widened too. We share his horrified response to the brutal murder of Morris, as well as his sympathy for Rob's situation; yet at the same time we can see his narrownesses and limitations of response. In a fine comic encounter, he offers to apprentice Rob's sons to a Glasgow weaver, a well-meant but ill-judged gesture to which Rob responds with the inevitable explosion; and in his remarks on honour and credit, he reveals his

³⁶ Ibid., Ch. 34, p. 394.

narrowest 'Glasgow' side: ' "But I maun hear naething about honour - we ken naething here but about credit. Honour is a homicide and a blood-spiller, that gangs about making frays in the street; but Credit is a decent honest man, that sits at hame and makes the pat play".³⁷ Jarvie giving thanks to the ' "gude braid claith" ' of the coat by which he hung suspended from a cliff rock while an attack by Highlanders was taking place: ' "Had I been in ony o' your rotten French camlets now, or your drab-de-berries, it would hae screeded like an auld rag wi' sic a weight as mine" ';³⁸ is provincial arrogance made sublime.

In one of the great comic incidents in the book, however, Jarvie reveals resources of Highland bravery beneath his Lowland respectability. When he and Frank are offered violence by some Highlanders at an inn, in Chapter 28, Frank draws a rapier, but Jarvie's sword is rusted into the scabbard; so he brings the skirmish to an end by seizing the red-hot coulter of a plough and setting fire to his antagonist's plaid. Rob later comments on the incident, admitting that Jarvie is not completely sunk into urban and effete respectability: ' "...my cousin Jarvie...has some gentleman's bluid in his veins, although he has been unhappily bred up to a peaceful and mechanical craft, which could not but blunt any pretty man's

³⁷ Ibid., Ch. 26, p. 288.

³⁸ Ibid., Ch. 31, p. 347.

spirit".³⁹ Jarvie has not, as Frank rather patronisingly observes, 'the advantages of a learned education';⁴⁰ he is, rather, another example of how human nature can best be studied through someone who is, despite the urban overlay, 'natural' in his responses; and he is also an example, perhaps the greatest example in Scott, of a humorous character who best embodies the values of the kinds of societies which it was Scott's main purpose to analyse.

3

Scott is the last great representative of the Enlightenment tradition of sociological writing in Scotland in the eighteenth century, a tradition distinguished by its grasp of historical movements, its knowledge of the workings of a society at the key points of its power, its ability to make comparisons between societies at various stages of their development, and its confidence of judgement on moral issues; and Scott added to the contributions of the historians a profound imaginative understanding of the behaviour of social man. The novels of Galt which are to be considered now- :Annals of the Parish (1821), The Provost (1822), and The Member (1832): - form a brilliant coda to the main movement of Enlightenment sociology in fictional form, and are

³⁹ Ibid., Ch. 34, p. 383.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Ch. 27, p. 304.

part of that extraordinary post-Waterloo renaissance of Scottish writing which also produced Susan Ferrier's Marriage (the first volume of which is a brilliant account of the impact of Scottish manners on the unwary stranger), Lockhart's near-masterpiece Adam Blair, a study of passions warped by a rigid religious tradition, Hogg's Confessions of a Justified Sinner, and Carlyle's great work Sartor Resartus. The novels of the Galt trilogy are in the form of social histories, each told by a central figure as a series of loosely connected reminiscences, and each representing a perfect balance between the humorous individuality of the narrator and the rendering of the social context through his point of view, so that both the utmost singularity and the richest social milieu are presented at once, indissolubly linked together.

Annals of the Parish is an account of the affairs of the small Scottish community of Dalmailing from 1760 to 1810, as told by the Reverend Micah Balwhidder. In his simplicity of character, the vicar resembles Goldsmith's Doctor Primrose, and his naive response to the changes in the life of the community over the years is a frequent source of the book's gentle humour. The most (apparently) unfortunate event is seen as evidence of the working of a favourable Providence, as in the incident when, on coming to the town to inspect his new lands, the new Laird has an accident

in which, due to the blocking of the narrow street, he is thrown from his coach into the middens; but this accident leads to the construction of a new road round the town, 'which is a clear proof how improvements came about, as it were, by the immediate instigation of Providence, which should make the heart of man humble, and change his eyes of pride and haughtiness into a lowly demeanour'.⁴¹ The juxtaposition of the hand of Providence and the weighing of an ounce of snuff is the source of the humour in the vicar's interpretation of the death of the aunt of Miss Sabrina Hookie, who has become a schoolteacher because her aunt failed to make her will in time: 'Before her testament was made, she was carried suddenly off by an apoplectick, an awful monument of the uncertainty of time, and the nearness of eternity, in her own shop, as she was in the very act of weighing out an ounce of snuff to a Professor of the College, as Miss Sabrina herself told me' (Ch.9,pp.48-9).

Galt also builds up the character of the vicar through his use of vivid images; in his sermons warning against smuggling, Balwhidder 'told them, that, although the money came in like slate stones, it would go like the snow off the dyke' (Ch.2,p.11),

⁴¹ Annals of the Parish (1821 Oxford English Novels, 1967), Ch.8,p.43. All further references to Annals of the Parish are incorporated in the text.

and as the house of Breadland burns down, its mistress, the miserly Miss Grizy (known as Lady Skim-milk) perishes in the flames, clutching a gold watch and a silver tea-pot; as she disappears from the window, the vicar comments, 'It was a dreadful business; I think to this hour, how I saw her at the window, how the fire came in behind her, and claugth her like a fiery Belzebub, and hore her into perdition before our eyes' (Ch.7,p.36).

The life of the community is rich, too, in those kinds of anecdotes which Scott valued so much. On the revival of the smuggling trade, the excise-officer visits the shop of the Pawkie sisters, who are smuggling tea to Glasgow; on his approach, they stuff the mattress with the tea and Betty Pawkie lies on the bed pretending to be ill, but the tea is discovered; however, the sisters have the last word, when Betty slits the mattress open as it is being carried across a river, and the contraband floats away. On another occasion, Balwhidder allows another clergyman, the apparently blameless Heckletext, to deputise for him; but among the congregation is the girl who is bearing Heckletext's child, and the shock brings on a miscarriage.

To the impact of those forces for change which affect the life of the community from outside, the coming of the cotton mill and the impact of revolution and war, the vicar responds with an old-fashioned

dispensation of the Gospel and a simplicity which contains a kind of shrewdness of judgement; over the spirit of improvement he detects 'something like a shadow' (Ch.32,p.137), and preaches a series of unpopular sermons on the vanity of riches. Galt evokes the humour and the pathos of a whole way of life, as seen through the uncomplicated vision of the vicar; but in The Provost, the next novel of the trilogy, the humour is sharper, and the narrator, the Provost James Pawkie, is a more complex character than is the vicar; he is, in fact, a major comic creation in the tradition of Scott.

Pawkie, three times Provost of Gudetown, relates the events of the community over the same period as that covered by Balwhidder in his chronicle. His judgements are sharper and his reactions more worldly than those of the vicar of Dalmailing; he is a strong supporter of the Government, as his vivid characterisation of weavers reveals:

I think, upon the whole, however, that our royal borough was not afflicted to any very dangerous degree (by the state of disaffection), though there was a sort of itch of it among a few of the sedentary orders, such as the weavers and shoemakers, who, by the nature of sitting long in one posture, are apt to become subject to the flatulence of theoretical opinions, 42

and his description of the pompous Mr Peevie is a

⁴² The Provost (1822 ,Oxford English Novels,1973), Ch.18,p.57. All further references to The Provost are incorporated in the text.

masterpiece of comic deflation:

This Mr Peevie was, in his person, a stumpy man, well advanced in years. He had been, in his origin, a bonnet-maker, but falling heir to a friend that left him a property, he retired from business about the fiftieth year of his age, doing nothing, but walking about with an ivory headed staff, in a suit of dark blue cloth, with yellow buttons, wearing a large cocked hat, and a white three-tiered wig, which was well powdered every morning by Duncan Curl, the barber. The method of his discourse and conversation was very precise, and his words were all set forth in a style of consequence, that took with many for a season, as the pith and marrow of solidity and sense. The bodie, however, was but a pompous trifle, and I had for many a day held his observes and admonishments in no very reverential estimation. So that when I heard him address me, in such a memorializing manner, I was inclined and tempted to set him off with a flea in his lug. However, I was enabled to bridle and rein in this prejudicial humour, and answer him in his own way. (Ch.43, pp.134-5)

In resisting the temptation to dismiss Peevie on the spot, Pawkie (the word means sly or cunning) reveals his own humour, which is his consummate ability to manipulate others for his own ends, in this case the replacement, with Peevie's help, of two awkward councillors by two men who are more 'reasonable'. Whenever possible, Pawkie prefers to use his influence in a secret way, and to make others do his own bidding; he believes that 'it was a better thing, in the world, to have power and influence, than to show the possession of either' (Ch.11,p.37), and that 'the secret of the new way of ruling the world was to follow, not to control, the

evident dictates of the popular voice'(Ch.28,p.89); and as he quietly runs things from behind the scenes, he carefully buys up much of the property in the town.

On the key question of the reaping of private rewards from public services, a main sociological theme of the novel, Pawkie confesses a 'sort of sinister respect for my own interests' when he was getting his first taste of power; but of late, he claims, public servants have become more honest in their conduct of affairs, and there is a 'purer spirit' abroad than formerly (Ch.43,pp.133-4). So Pawkie develops (Balwhidder, by contrast, does not) in character, through his experiences of holding public office, and at the end of his career confesses to regretting some of his earlier actions, for example his part in getting the Kirk for Mr Pittle: 'I had acted with the levity and indiscretion of a young man' (Ch.44,p.138). In this incident, Pawkie is afraid that his wife's cousin Lizzy Pinkie might come to depend on him, so, knowing that Pittle wants to marry her, Pawkie will help to get Pittle the Kirk if he does so, and he uses his influence in a property deal to get the help of the powerful Bailie M'Lure. But, despite his awareness of the changing standards of public life, Pawkie uses essentially the same kinds of stratagems at the end of his career as he used at the beginning; and the novel is a series of triumphant exhibitions of the Provost's sly humour,

treated by Galt with amused affection and tolerant satire. Just as his final official acts are to get rid of the two awkward councillors and to arrange for his own resignation - present through other people, so in the early part of his career he had fixed the Pittle appointment, arranged for the local Laird to be nominal Provost while he wielded the real power, effectively abolished troublesome fairs not by direct order but by splitting up the stalls so that they looked thinly attended, converted a potentially radical newspaper into a supporter of the Government (and advertised his houses in it) and thwarted a scheme for a new academy in the town. But the novel is not simply a study of a character; it is also a brilliantly confident and precise rendering of the life of a community, all the more vivid as it is relayed through the sharp mind of a natural politician, rather than the idealistic vision of a simple clergyman.

Galt concluded his humorous examination of the Tory mind in The Member, a novel which shares many of its predecessors' virtues. Once again the narrator tells the story, in this case his attempts to become a Member of Parliament for a rotten borough in the years before 1832. Archibald Jobbry has returned from India a rich man, and decides to offer himself as a candidate for Parliament, to serve his own interests and those of his clamouring relatives;

he is eventually returned as a Member for Frailtown, and retires on the eve of Reform. There is in this novel the same acuteness of judgement, conveyed through vivid imagery, as there was in the previous works; when the Whigs finally attain power, Jobbry comments vividly, 'I had, indeed, a sore heart when I saw the Whigs and Whiglings coming louping, like the puddochs of Egypt, over among the right-hand benches of the House of Commons, greedy as corbies and chattering like pyets',⁴³ and in the course of his career as an independent member on the Government side, he has many pithy observations to make upon the reality of power and how, in his view, it should be wielded. He despises 'Utility' ('an ignorant mistake of the nature of man to think the world is to be ruled by one class of motives'), and believes in the principles of patronage and conciliation, an essential part of his Tory pessimism and realism:

Sinecures ought not to be considered as salaries for doing nothing, but as salaries set apart nominally for the use of those dependants of influential people whom it is necessary to conciliate to the Government. All governments must have various means of conciliating various men: there must be titles and degrees for those whom such baubles please; there must be enterprises and commands for those who delight in adventures; and there must be sinecures and pensions for the sordid. It is as much to be lamented that such humours are entailed upon our common nature, as it is to be mourned that it is liable to so many various diseases...⁴⁴

and he has some interesting observations on the limits to the personal patronage he gave to people

⁴³ The Member (1832, edited by Ian A. Gordon, 1975), Ch. 36, p. 119.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Ch. 9, pp. 30-1.

as a Member, confining himself to the deserving cases of needy widows and orphans.

The finest humour of the book is in the early sections, when Jobbry is first elected to the borough of Frailtown against the opposition of some of the townspeople. The Member is elected by the corporation of six burgesses, but if one councillor should be absent, the mayor has to go to the market-place and summon five burgesses by name, thus packing the assembly, in the event of an abstracted councillor, with his own men. The mayor, who opposes Jobbry, duly abstracts a councillor by hiding him in a viol case and conveying him home; but Jobbry and his friends get wind of the plot and bring the viol case, with the councillor inside it, back into the chamber, when the councillor is released and Jobbry is elected. The whole process of manoeuvring Jobbry into the rotten seat is brilliantly done, but the novel, unlike the others of the trilogy, degenerates towards the end, when Jobbry loses some of his individuality and tends to become merely the mouthpiece for airing issues of the day such as fiscal and Parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation. But although the novel is perhaps the weakest of the three, it offers fascinating insights, at its best, into the processes of political power exercised on a national scale by an intelligent Tory of the old school, 'really and cordially devoted to the public good'⁴⁵ as he says

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

in the Dedication to his memoirs.

In his trilogy, Galt brings the local history genre to a kind of perfection; but it was a genre which was to appeal to the next generation of writers, who saw the humorous sketch as an important way of recording life at an intimately local level. In transferring his main location to London, Dickens transformed the possibilities of the genre in Sketches by Boz; but he is building, in a Romantic way, as was Mrs Gaskell in the more traditional approach in Cranford, on the foundations which Galt laid in his three novels. A central difference between the approach of Galt and that of Dickens lies in the humour of their sketches of society; Galt's humour, the main medium whereby the creative flow is conveyed, comes through the amiable foible tradition of the eighteenth century and, more significantly, through the treatment of that tradition by Scott, who used his humorous characters to convey the moral theme taken up, in his own way, by Galt: that survival is possible only by an intelligent and honourable accommodation with the realities of social change and the passions of men for power. In Sketches by Boz, the Romantic humorous vision of society is, as we shall see, more complex and disturbing than Galt's accounts of local life in his impressive trilogy.

CHAPTER THREE.VARIETIES OF THE SCEPTICAL MIND:HUMOUR IN AUSTEN, PEACOCK, AND BYRON

1

While Edgeworth, Scott and Galt were consolidating and enriching the humorous achievement of the eighteenth century by realising the enormous sociological possibilities of the humorous imagination, another, more sceptical kind of argument about humour was going on in the work of other writers. Most significantly for the future of humour, Austen directly and devastatingly challenged the whole conception of the amiable foible's right to a place in our hearts, insisting that, on the contrary, the humorous character represented a menace to social order. Peacock developed the humorous character in a delightful, individual way; but the probing satirical spirit which was copresent in his novels gradually became more rancorously insistent, finally overwhelming the humorous character himself by its strident, reactionary assertions. Byron's humour was neither controlled by a sceptical intelligence nor destroyed by it; the humour was itself a sceptical irony, a variation on German Romantic Irony, by which moral assertion was constantly questioned and undermined. Of these varieties of scepticism, Austen's was perhaps the least spectacular, but the most significant; Peacock's and Byron's achievement led nowhere, but Austen's voice was heard half a century later by Eliot.

The starting point of this discussion is a comparison between the didactic, straightforward irony of Edgeworth in two of her comic stories, The Modern Griselda and Manoeuvring, and the oblique, sceptical irony of Pride and Prejudice and Emma; but it is argued that, behind Austen's sceptical irony, there is a firm belief that objective truth is knowable, and that part of that truth is the assumption, which she shares with Congreve, that a balance between the individual life and the social life must be struck. Hence the individualism of the humorous character is not commended but attacked by Austen, whose humour serves the causes of judgement and discrimination rather than understanding and reconciliation. The implication of Austen's view, that the humorous character was not capable of the kinds of social and personal developments which were the main interests of the novelist, forms the first serious challenge to the sentimental humorous tradition, and, since this view was shared by Eliot, the challenge can be seen as more radical than Byron's superficially startling ironic juxtapositions.

The Modern Griselda is a comic study of self-defeating female perversity, in which the heroine torments her husband by constant and deliberate changes of mood in the hope of retaining his affection; in the end the opposite effect is achieved, his patience wears out and he puts up no

opposition to her threats to leave him. While the story shows some of Austen's command of dialogue, Edgeworth simply uses the characters to illustrate her didactic point, a warning to her female readers that such behaviour forms a bad example. In the first chapter, character is mainly established through the dialogue, revealing examples of Griselda's stratagems in conversation with her husband. She invents two trivial causes for complaint, the first that her husband was not as loud in his praises of her performance on the harp the second time as he was the first, and the second that her husband's discussion with an old friend of his bachelor days is in some way a slight on herself. But Edgeworth does not allow the dialogue alone to make the points about the heroine's character, so anxious is she to make the point clear to the reader; the chapter ends with a typically didactic summary from the narrator, outlining Griselda's awareness of the 'power of sensibility' to control her husband's affections, and conveying a suggestion of the future unsuspected danger: 'Let any candid female say, or, if she will not say, imagine, what she should have felt at that moment in Griselda's place. - How intoxicating to human vanity, to be possessed of such powers of enchantment! - How difficult to refrain from their exercise! - How impossible to believe in their finite duration!' ¹ By contrast, Austen's treatment

¹ The Modern Griselda (1805), Tales and Novels, vol. 6, Ch. 1, p. 413.

of character in the conversation between Mr and Mrs Bennet in the first chapter of Pride and Prejudice is more dramatic than Edgeworth's treatment of Griselda and her husband, by which the characters simply illustrate a didactic point within a rigid framework.

Also typical of Edgeworth's didactically illustrative approach is the neat patterning of her characters, to make clear a distinction between intelligence and stupidity, or sense and affectation. In The Modern Griselda, Edgeworth uses two female characters whose advice to the heroine is in opposition; Mrs Nettleby advises Griselda to manage her husband firmly, and thus set the pattern for the marriage as a whole, and Emma Granby, who represents the good-humoured steadiness of character which Griselda lacks, sensibly urges compromise. There is patterning of this kind in Austen too, but in Pride and Prejudice and Emma it is far more discreet, without Edgeworth's blatant obtrusiveness.

Edgeworth, too, is not interested in showing the development of the characters in her story; Griselda's variations on a theme are the central subject, her character does not develop, and at the end of the story she has learned nothing. For the idea of development of her characters, the central element in Austen's novels, Edgeworth substitutes repeated didactic statements, which dominate,

incongruously, her lightest comedies. Her anxious desire to completely control the reactions of her reader by the reliance on such statements can be seen in her observation on the danger of charging one's husband with being late for dinner, in a tone of earnest solemnity which incongruously expresses a trivial sentiment: 'We should humbly advise our female friends to forbear exposing a husband's patience to this trial, or at least to temper it with much fondness, else mischief will infallibly ensue.' ²

The style is as rigid as the construction in this story; typical is the weighty movement from the particular to the general, when we learn that Griselda 'had never calculated the prodigious effects which can be produced by petty causes constantly acting. Indeed this is a consideration, to which the pride or short-sightedness of human nature is not prone'.³ At one point, Edgeworth shows that she is aware of her didactic tendencies, when she feigns comic embarrassment over introducing a comparison between an airballoon and the human mind: 'the reader, however impatient, must listen to this allusion':⁴ - but, nevertheless, the comparison is made; and a short story which contains references to,

² Ibid., Ch.2, p.415.

³ Ibid., Ch.11, p.448.

⁴ Ibid., Ch.16, p.461.

or quotations from, Johnson, Tacitus, Kames, the Marquis de Chastellux, Martial and Milton carries a rather large quantity of didactic ballast when compared to a novel of Austen.

Austen's general comments on human nature are made in a tone which is appropriate to their subject-matter; her remarks on dancing in Emma are general in application, but the irony is appropriately light, not earnestly solemn:

It may be possible to do without dancing entirely. Instances have been known of young people passing many, many months successively, without being at any ball of any description, and no material injury accrue either to body or mind; - but when a beginning is made - when the felicities of rapid motion have once been, though slightly, felt - it must be a very heavy set that does not ask for more. 5

By contrast with the openly expressed confidence of Edgeworth's mind, a confidence founded on her father's system of education, with its scientific bias and its stress on the importance of factual information, Austen's mind exhibits a greater complexity, which can emerge as the flexible combination and juxtaposition of words by means of wit and irony to produce a texture which sometimes resembles the texture of the poetry of Pope. In

⁵ Emma (1816), The Novels of Jane Austen, edited by R.W. Chapman, Third Edition (1933), Vol. 2, Ch. 11, p. 247.

this paragraph from Pride and Prejudice, Mary's triviality is defined by the juxtaposition of 'thorough bass' with 'human nature'; and the placing of 'a private had been flogged' in the context of dining and marriage produces a shock of the kind which Pope often uses in his satire:

They found Mary, as usual, deep in the study of thorough bass and human nature; and had some new extracts to admire, and some new observations of thread-bare morality to listen to. Catherine and Lydia had information for them of a different sort. Much had been done, and much had been said in the regiment since the preceding Wednesday; several of the officers had dined lately with their uncle, a private had been flogged, and it had actually been hinted that Colonel Forster was going to be married. 6

Edgeworth's long story Manoeuvring has the same limitations as The Modern Griselda, and includes a romance element in the plot which jars with the realism of most of the story, a mistake which Austen never made. The devious stratagems of the heroine, Mrs Beaumont, are the main subject of the story, which is designed to illustrate the advisability of plain speaking in the face of the self-defeating pointlessness of the devious behaviour of the heroine. The basic contrast of the story is established, in a typically straightforward way, in the first chapter, in a discussion between Mrs Beaumont's neighbour Mr

⁶ Pride and Prejudice (1813), The Novels of Jane Austen, edited by R.W.Chapman, Third Edition (1932), vol. 1, Ch.12, p.60.

Walsingham, and his daughter, in which he warns her of Mrs Beaumont's arts: ' "The momentary pain I give my friends by speaking the plain truth, I have always found overbalanced by the pleasure and advantage of mutual confidence. Our domestic happiness has arisen chiefly from our habits of openness and sincerity. Our whole souls are laid open" '...'⁷

Mrs Beaumont's entanglements in her own contradictions and lies are displayed in her plots to marry off her son and daughter to a stupid upper class woman and her baronet brother, rather than to Mr Walsingham's daughter and his ward, Captain Walsingham; but the narrator continually reinforces the moral point of the story by direct references to Mrs Beaumont's 'too easy belief of secret underhand information', to the inconsistencies of cunning people, and to the mistakes made by 'artful persons' in judging the 'open-hearted and the generous'.⁸ A further weakness of the story is the manipulation of the plot at the end, when Mrs Beaumont herself marries the baronet whom she has marked out for her daughter, only to discover that he is not after all to come into a large estate and that he has married her for her money; and the real heir to the estate,

⁷ Manoeuvring (1809), Tales and Novels, vol.5, Ch.1, pp.7-8.

⁸ Ibid., Ch.6, p.48.

equally improbably, turns out to be the young woman whom Captain Walsingham had rescued from imprisonment in a nunnery earlier in the story. Austen never allows the irruption of romance elements to intrude into the realism of action of her novels; and whereas Edgeworth forces an often improbable plot upon her static characters, in Austen's novels the progress of the story is dictated by the moral choices of the characters themselves.

Manoeuvring and The Modern Griselda are part of the series of Tales of Fashionable Life which were written to point out the kinds of faults to which those who live in the upper reaches of society are prone. Like Emma, Edgeworth's stories have as their subject the consequences of the efforts of a woman to manage the lives of others. But in Emma, Austen depicts a process, in the psychology of the main character, of learning from her experiences, by which objective reality gradually comes to shape her will and desires. Edgeworth's heroines learn nothing through their constant manoeuvring; it is rather the reader who learns that such behaviour is wrong and in the end futile, when Griselda and Mrs Beaumont are trapped by their own character-trait. So, in a sense, is Emma; but in Austen's novel the trap is not sprung by a crude and arbitrary device of plot, but by growing self-awareness in Emma, by which she attains that self-knowledge which consists in adjustment to the pressures of social reality. The process of

re-reading Manoeuvring merely reinforces the contrast between plain-speaking and deviousness, whereas the process of re-reading Emma introduces new perspectives, whereby the reader sees Emma more objectively than he did the first time, and sees more clearly, as Emma herself comes to do, the elements of truth in the points of view of the other characters. Edgeworth's confidence is replaced, in Austen, by a more tentative awareness of the difficulty of coming to the truth itself, in a statement in which Emma's experience is made a type of all our experiences of the search for self-knowledge: 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.'⁹

By contrast with Edgeworth's humorous irony, that of Austen in Emma and Pride and Prejudice is sceptical and oblique, reflecting the view that arriving at the truth about oneself is a difficult and painful process; but for Austen there is a truth to be discovered through rigorous self-examination, a truth of which certain characters, such as Mr Knightley in Emma (with the exception of his lapse of judgement about Frank Churchill), are the repositories. Truth can be discovered, in Austen's revealing image, by penetrating a disguise, behind which lies the reward for honest self-examination:

⁹ Emma, vol. 3, Ch.13, p.431.

that perfect adjustment between individual wishes and social obligations. The scepticism of Austen is not of the self-contradicting kind of Byron, or of the uncomfortable kind of Thackeray which insists on the irredeemable selfishness of us all; it is more like that of Pope, confident that truth and right reason are there to be found.

What Austen does insist on, however, as a basic requirement for the apprehension of reality, is that the individual should curb such expressions of the personality which result in unbridled expressions of anti-social behaviour such as snobbery, affectation and the tendency to monologue; part of the price to be paid for social adjustment involves a control of those expressions of natural, spontaneous feeling for which the amiable foible was praised and admired. Nor did Austen share the belief that social structures corrupt natural feeling. Rather did she put into her humorous characters all that she disliked about human behaviour; they are incapable of self-knowledge, their excesses of self-expression are socially embarrassing, and, above all, characters such as the affected Mr Collins and Mrs Elton, and the natural humorists Miss Bates and Mr Woodhouse alike, are damned to the same terrible fate: they are incapable of being educated. In this sense they are irredeemable, Calvinistically conceived in the sense used by Professor Gilbert Ryle; 'black' characters, who stand sharply apart from the usual Austen conception

of a character as consisting of mixed attributes, some good and others less pleasant.¹⁰ It was this aspect of her scepticism by which Austen challenged the whole conception of character as conceived in Parson Adams and Uncle Toby; and in her view of humour in character as a deviation from rational behaviour, she looks back to the example of Congreve.

The Way of the World and the two Austen novels under discussion resemble each other, first, in their general organisation. The Way of the World is dominated by the values represented by Millamant and Mirabell, the witty and attractive hero and heroine. The central scene of the play in which these values are defined is the discussion, in Act 4, scene 1, of the conditions on which each will marry the other; this discussion defines the theoretical basis for a rational married relationship, by contrast with the miserable marriages which seem to be the norm. Millamant and Mirabell try to define the kind of relationship which would permit the maximum amount of freedom to the marriage partner, yet which would preserve the love which each feels for the other within the formal and social structure of the relationship; this attempt to strike a balance between personal fulfillment

¹⁰ 'Jane Austen and the Moralists' (1966), in Collected Papers, vol.1, Critical Essays (1971), pp.284-7.

and social integration was to be a central interest of Austen herself. The other main characters, Fainall and Mrs Marwood, typify a frustrated relationship, and the outer circle of characters are the humorous characters, whose foibles are shown to deviate from canons of rational social behaviour; they are the foppish Witwoud and Petulant, the country bumpkin Sir Wilfull Witwoud, and Lady Wishfort.

In Pride and Prejudice and Emma, there is also a three-tier character arrangement, carrying the same kinds of moral values. At the centre of Pride and Prejudice, the hero and heroine work out the basis of their relationship; outside them are two pairs of lovers, Bingley and Jane Bennet (representing legitimate passion) and Wickham and Lydia Bennet (representing illicit passion), and the outer circle is occupied by the deviant humorous characters, Mr and Mrs Bennet, Lady Catherine de Burgh, and Mr Collins. This structure is repeated in Emma, in which Emma and Mr Knightley occupy the centre; revolving round them are Harriet and Robert Martin whose love is acceptable, and Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax who defy convention, though not so tragically as Wickham or Lydia; and the outer circle again contains the humorous characters, Miss Bates, Mr Woodhouse, and Mrs Elton.

The main target for satirical attack in Congreve and Austen, as in Fielding, is affectation, represented in The Way of the World by the brainless fops Witwoud and Petulant, and, to some extent, Lady Wishfort, and by Mr Collins, Lady Catherine and Mrs Elton in the Austen novels. These characters are stupid, vulgar, and they menace the preservation of civilised standards; and part of their function is to indicate the good sense and intelligence of the hero and heroine. Although in his theory of humour Congreve distinguished between natural and affected humours, in his plays he tends to satirise natural humours, as Austen does in her novels; the character of Sir Wilfull Witwoud carries associations of the uncouth behaviour of the country squire, and is thus a target for satirical treatment. But Sir Wilfull is sometimes seen sympathetically, in the incident when his sincerity and forthrightness are favourably contrasted with the irrational and cold formality of the manners of the town; when his half-brother Witwoud explains that 'tis not modish to know Relations in Town', Sir Wilfull exposes his pretensions by revealing that he was once an attorney's clerk.¹¹

But the most ambiguously conceived character in the play is Lady Wishfort, who is a major humorous

¹¹ The Way of the World (1700), The Complete Plays of William Congreve, edited by Herbert Davis (University of Chicago Press, 1967), 111, i, 533.

creation, possessing linguistic resources of almost Falstaffian proportions; her way with the language shows the kind of individual idiosyncrasy which we approve of in Thady Quirk and Dick Swiveller, and for which we are meant to condemn Miss Bates and Mrs Elton. The basis of Lady Wishfort's character is her belief that she is sexually attractive; a gross affectation, since she is middle-aged, grotesquely ugly and hideously vulgar. In the course of the play, she is deceived into thinking that she is about to receive an offer of marriage from the rich Sir Rowland, who is really Waitwell, a servant of Mirabell's, disguised to further his plans to marry Millamant. As Lady Wishfort prepares to meet the supposed Sir Rowland, she evokes her grotesque appearance as she peers into the glass: 'Let me see the Glass - Cracks, say'st thou? Why I am arrantly flea'd - I look like an old peel'd Wall. Thou must repair me Foible, before Sir Rowland comes; or I shall never keep up to my Picture.' ¹²

As she plans to receive her suitor in just the right attitude of studied casualness, the linguistic vitality she generates makes her comic, pathetic, and disgusting at the same time:

Well, and how shall I receive him? In what figure shall I give his Heart the first Impression? There is a great deal in the

¹² Ibid., lll, i, 147-50. The italics of the original have been omitted.

first Impression. Shall I sit? - No I won't sit - I'll walk - aye I'll walk from the door upon his entrance; and then turn full upon him - No, that will be too sudden. I'll lie - aye, I'll lie down - I'll receive him in my little dressing Room, there's a Couch - Yes, yes, I'll give the first Impression on a Couch - I won't lie neither but loll and lean upon one Elbow; with one foot a little dangling off, Jogging in a thoughtful way - Yes - and then as soon as he appears, start, ay, start and be surpriz'd, and rise to meet him in a pretty disorder - Yes - O, nothing is more alluring than a Levee from a Couch in some Confusion - It shows the Foot to advantage, and furnishes with Blushes, and re-composing Airs beyond comparison. 13

Lady Wishfort gains our sympathy in many ways. She is the victim both of Mirabell's sordid plot to get her to marry his servant, and of a disgusting lampoon by him in which it is claimed that she is pregnant; and she is also the victim of social convention since she has, through ignorance rather than malice, brought up her daughter in complete ignorance of men, thus causing the failure of her marriage to Fainall and her terrible unhappiness. But Lady Wishfort is sympathetic, and even endearing, for a mainly aesthetic reason. It is her creative way with the language which endears her to us; and her surrealist distortions of English as she woos Sir Rowland anticipate the distortions of Mrs Malaprop, Mrs Gamp, and even Molly Bloom; and so catching is the habit that Sir Rowland falls into it himself at the end of the scene:

Lady Wishfort: Well, Sir Rowland, you have the way, - You are no Novice in the Labyrinth

of Love - You have the Clue - But as I am a person, Sir Rowland, You must not attribute my yielding to any sinister appetite, or Indigestion of Widow-hood; nor Impute my Complacency, to any Lethargy of Continence - I hope you do not think me prone to any iteration of Nuptials -

Waitwell: Far be it from me -

Lady Wishfort: If you do, I protest I must recede - or think that I have made a prostitution of decorums, but in the Vehemence of Compassion, and to save the life of a Person of so much Importance -

Waitwell: I esteem it so -

Lady Wishfort: Or else you wrong my Condescension -

Waitwell: I do not, I do not -

Lady Wishfort: Indeed you do.

Waitwell: I do not, Fair Shrine of Vertue.

Lady Wishfort: If you think the least Scruple of Carnality was an Ingredient -

Waitwell: Dear Madam, no. You are all Camphire and Frankincense, all Chastity and Odour. 14

Austen, too, often allows her humorous characters a linguistic vitality which gives them a more vivid kind of reality than that of the hero and heroine, whose role as exemplars of the potentially ideal social being must deny to them the idiosyncratic expressiveness of a Miss Bates or a Mrs Elton. Mrs Elton's snobbery is conveyed in a kind of shorthand, a prose with all the connexions left out, which approaches a stream of consciousness to convey her wandering vacuity of mind:

'The best fruit in England - everybody's favourite - always wholesome. - These the finest beds and finest sorts. - Delightful to gather for one's self - the only way of really enjoying them. - Morning decidedly the best time - never tired - every sort good -

hautboy infinitely superior - no comparison - the others hardy eatable - hautboys very scarce - Chili preferred - white wood finest flavour of all - price of strawberries in London - abundance about Bristol - Maple Grove - cultivation - beds when to be renewed - gardeners thinking exactly different - no general rule - gardeners never to be put out of their way - delicious fruit - only too rich to be eaten much of - inferior to cherries - currants more refreshing - only objection to gathering strawberries the stooping - glaring sun - tired to death - could bear it no longer - must go and sit in the shade.' 15

Austen's treatment of a natural humorist such as Miss Bates is slightly more sympathetic than her treatment of affectation. Miss Bates is certainly a fool, as her chatter vividly suggests (this chatter is not quite so aimless as perhaps Austen intends it to be, since through Miss Bates we learn a great deal about the workings of the local society at the lower middle class level), but the sympathy we feel for this woman who is condemned to a life of spinsterhood, looking after a senile mother, is utilised in the great Box Hill scene, where we feel that Emma's insult is as thoughtless as Mr Knightley says it is; but even here, Austen is using a comic character to reflect an aspect of the heroine's personality, by setting into motion a moral discovery about Emma herself.

In her treatment of her humorous characters, Austen not only looks back to Congreve, but also forward to the great novelists of the nineteenth

¹⁵ Emma, vol. 3, Ch.6, pp.358-9.

century. Her humorous characters often carry the kinds of social judgements which we find in Eliot or James; whereas both Mrs Elton and Lady Catherine epitomise vulgarity, in the case of Mrs Elton it is the eager vulgarity of the parvenu which grates on the ears of the settled families of Highbury with such discordant noise, and in the case of Lady Catherine it is the outmoded vulgarity of family honour which is indicated, and which has no place in the world of predominantly middle class values. The humorous characters are thus carefully integrated into the social and moral analysis of the novel; there is not the slightest danger that they will take over the book, as sometimes happened in the novels of Scott and Dickens. They are also relegated to the periphery of the action, whose main concern is the education of the central characters, a process in which the humorous characters can play no positive part.

2

In Pride and Prejudice and Emma, the humorous character, elsewhere the lovable eccentric whose defiance of social convention and spontaneous revelation of personality make us take him to our hearts, is subjected to the ruthless and unblinking gaze of a judging and discriminating sceptical spirit; in the novels of Peacock to be considered next, he

is once again the amiable foible of the more comfortable and reassuring tradition. But side by side with Peacock's humorous inventiveness, there exists a satirical vision which does not control, as it does in Austen, the irruptions of the humorists, but which coexists rather uneasily with them; and, as Peacock's career develops, the spirit of satire, becoming more bitter and baffled in the face of intractable social problems, finally swamps the genial humorous side of Peacock's achievement, in Crotchet Castle. First to be considered is Peacock's unique contribution to the tradition of the amiable foible.

Peacock's novels have a special place in the scheme of this discussion, and in English fiction as a whole. Peacock invented a new form of fiction, that of the extended conversation-piece or debate, carried out by humorous characters; but the characters are humorous not in the Parson Adams or Toby Shandy manner, in which a natural foible of personality is made the basis of extended analysis of character, but in the Don Quixote or Walter Shandy manner, in which the character is grounded in an intellectual foible or fixed idea, into the confines of which the world is to be condensed. Peacock's characters are a crowd of talkative and cranky Walter Shandys, setting the world to rights in a country house:

Mr Chainmail was in hot dispute with Mr Skionar, touching the physical and moral well-being of man. Mr Skionar was enforcing his friend Mr Shantsee's views of moral discipline; maintaining that the sole thing needful for man in this world, was loyal and pious education; the giving men good books to read, and enough of the hornbook to read them; with a judicious interspersion of the lessons of Old Restraint, which was his peetic name for the parish stocks. Mr Chainmail, on the other hand, stood up for the exclusive necessity of beef and ale, lodging and raiment, wife and children, courage to fight for them all, and armour wherewith to do so.

Mr Henbane had got his face scratched, and his finger bitten, by the cat, in trying to catch her for a second experiment in killing and bringing to life; and Doctor Morbific was comforting him with a disquisition, to prove that there were only four animals having the power to communicate hydrophobia, of which the cat was one; and that it was not necessary that the animal should be in a rabid state, the nature of the wound being everything, and the idea of contagion a delusion. Mr Henbane was listening very lugubriously to this dissertation. 16

This is a typical passage, in which the various humours of the characters are shown to be in full spate; and it illustrates, too, the flexibility of Peacock's satirical tone, moving from the witty irony of the characterisation by Skionar of the parish stocks, through to the straight-faced account of Doctor Morbific's pleasure in his tidy theories; and both Mr Skionar and Doctor Morbific illustrate such favourite Peacockian ideas as the power of

¹⁶ Crotchet Castle (1831), The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock, edited by David Garnett (1948), Ch. 7, p. 695.

intellectual ideas to blind their holders to the nature of reality, and the infinite capacity of the human intelligence for self-delusion. Peacock's presentation of such states of mind is usually good-natured, and he is best remembered for his amiable portraits of his famous contemporaries' ruling passions and fixed ideas. The successive incarnations of Coleridge, as Mr Panscope (in Headlong Hall), Mr Mystic (in Melincourt), Mr Flosky (in Nightmare Abbey; perhaps his finest incarnation), and Mr Skionar (in Crotchet Castle) present Coleridge's mystical propensities with the same good-natured mockery as are treated Byron's melancholy and exhibitionism in Nightmare Abbey, or the absurdities of the contending theorists of Headlong Hall, Mr Milestone (based on Repton) and Mr O'Prism (based on Price), whose views on landscape gardening allow Peacock the opportunity for one of his typical shafts of wit:

'Allow me,' said Mr Gall. 'I distinguish the picturesque and the beautiful, and I add to them, in the laying out of grounds, a third and distinct character, which I call unexpectedness.'

'Pray, sir,' said Mr Milestone, 'by what name do you distinguish this character, when a person walks round the grounds for the second time?' 17

Peacock uses other kinds of genial humour, too, in his novels; there is the farcical kind of humour of Mr Cranium's leap into the lake when he has heard

¹⁷ Headlong Hall (1816), *ibid.*, Ch. 4, p. 24.

an explosion nearby, and the kind of humour based on the Bergsonian mechanisation of the human, in his subsequent explanation of his leap in terms of necessity. And in his portrait of the drunken Prince Seithenyn in The Misfortunes of Elphin, Peacock creates a great humorous character in the tradition of Uncle Toby and Thady Quirk.

Peacock was not always, however, so urbane as the gentle charm of Headlong Hall and Nightmare Abbey suggests; and it is in his longest, most serious, and most substantial satirical work, Melincourt, that one can see both his strengths and weaknesses as a satirist of England's social ills. In this work, his insights resemble those of Carlyle and Dickens; but his limitations of analysis are also apparent from such a comparison. Whereas Carlyle, in Sartor Resartus, and Dickens, in his early novels, succeeded in bringing about a synthesis by which a powerful Romantic satirical vision was rendered through humorous embodiment of oppressive forces, Peacock's satirical vision remained rooted in the eighteenth century, in ways which were disabling.

The broad plan of Melincourt is the same as that of the other, shorter novels; an extended debate is woven into a romance-plot; and in Melincourt, too, many of Peacock's favourite targets reappear. Coleridge is attacked in fairly good-natured vein; Southey, a *bête noire* of Peacock's, is savagely

attacked for what Peacock saw as his desertion of former principles; and the periodical reviewers are bitterly attacked, especially in the long section set at Mainchance Villa. Much of the novel is a serious discussion, mainly carried on by Mr Forester and Mr Fax, of general social questions of the day: slavery, women's education, the population problem, the horrors of industrial society, political corruption, periodical reviewing and the state of high culture, and the evils of paper-money are all reviewed, and sometimes embodied dramatically. One of the most successful humorous embodiments of some of the ideas of the novel is the character of Sir Oran Haut-ton, whose various uses in the novel represent one of its greatest successes.

Sir Oran is Peacock's representation of natural and original man, man before he was corrupted by the artificialities and the horrors of 'civilisation'; he is courteous, polite, and sweet-natured, is full of natural, spontaneous feeling and is musical naturally, not possessing the power of speech, speech being an acquirement of artificial, civilised man. He was caught in the woods of Angola, shipped over to England and taken up by Mr Forester, who gave him a baronetcy and an estate so that the respect of society is ensured; and in the course of the novel he becomes an M.P. for the borough of Onevote. In

his general, symbolical significance as natural man, he contrasts with both the highly artificial products of the world of Society and Manners, and the distorted products of the new industrial society. The theme of the horrors of industrial life appears not only in Melincourt but briefly (and startlingly) in Headlong Hall, in Nightmare Abbey and in Crotchet Castle; and the constant point is the degeneration which industrial society has brought to mankind. Sir Oran's association with the rural and the pastoral connects him with another social theme: the ideal nature of the self-supporting rural life, which is the solution offered as the climax to the inset story about Desmond, who, having nearly been destroyed by the urban values of the world of literary London, finds ultimate satisfaction in a pastoral life as a grateful dependent on the paternalistic charity of Mr Forester, who sets him up on a farm. Sir Oran also serves as the focus of the two chapters of political satire, in which he is elected to Parliament for the rotten borough of Onevote, and fulfils the more poetical function of his role as protector of the heroine, Anthelia, whom he rescues from death by drowning in a raging torrent by tearing up a pine-tree and carrying her across it safe to the bank, in a scene in which the notion of beauty and the beast is effectively used; and by his later rescuing her from the villains of the piece, he demonstrates his natural feeling for beauty in distress.

Sir Oran, then, brings into focus some of the themes of the novel, and gives some notion of where Peacock's positive position as a satirist can be located; and we can also see where Peacock connects with the later, greater critics of society, in his fears for the death of feeling in oppressive social forms. He shares, too, some of the weaknesses which they revealed, at the end of longer processes of analysis and thought. Carlyle and Ruskin, too, could see a system; and, in the end they succumbed, exhausted by the weight of the problem, to paternalist solutions, in Carlyle's vision of a medieval society and Ruskin's Guild of Saint George.

The picture which is emerging, so far, is a picture of two Peacocks; the good-natured, easy-going anatomist of odd ideas and intellectual fads, working out a particular humorous vision developed from the eighteenth century tradition of humorous writing; and the satirical social critic with a general vision of degeneration, anticipating insights of later critics of society. But his analysis of the causes of social degeneration place him in the eighteenth, rather than the nineteenth century; although he can see a system of industrial exploitation and literary and political corruption, it is only on the most abstract and generalised level. His attempts to satirically expose the basis of the corruption are narrowly Augustan in character, since the chief

villains responsible for this state of affairs turn out to be the periodical reviewers. Peacock has a very sharp sense of how high culture is being, in his view, systematically corrupted in the quarterly press by men who serve narrow, reactionary and corrupt political interests, and a great deal of his satirical venom goes into the exposure of such men, particularly in the 'Mainchance Villa' section of Melincourt; but this part of his vision is separate from the easy-going humorist on the one hand, and only loosely linked to his role as the critic of industrial England on the other; and there is a passage in Melincourt which brings out his difficulty sharply.

Mr Forester is expounding his views on the degeneration of society, and begins with the remark that 'Man under the influence of civilisation has fearfully diminished in size and deteriorated in strength'. Taken on its own, this remark may associate Forester with the cranks at whose odd ideas we are invited to laugh; but he immediately moves into a powerful, generalised description of the appalling physical conditions of 'the lowest classes in civilised nations', by comparison with which the poverty of the savage is to be preferred:

Even if the prosperous among us enjoy some comforts unknown to the natural man, yet what is the poverty of the savage, compared with that of the lowest classes in civilised nations? The specious aspect of luxury and abundance in

one, is counterbalanced by the abject penury and circumscription of hundreds. Commercial prosperity is a golden surface, but all beneath it is rags and wretchedness. It is not in the splendid bustle of our principal streets - in the villas and mansions that sprinkle our valleys - for those who enjoy these things (even if they did enjoy them - even if they had health and happiness - and the rich have seldom either), bear but a small proportion to the whole population:- but it is in the mud hovel of the labourer - in the cellar of the artizan - in our crowded prisons - our swarming hospitals - our overcharged workhouses - in those narrow districts of our overgrown cities, which the affluent never see - where thousands and thousands of families are compressed within limits not sufficient for the pleasure-ground of a simple squire, - that we must study the true mechanism of political society.

But the 'philosopher', in turning to science for consolation, only finds that science has become 'the obsequious minister of recondite luxury, the specious appendage of vanity and power'; and the poet, too, is devoting his efforts to the flattery of rich and influential patrons. Forester's analysis ends with a comparison between the corruption of private and public men, heavily censuring the latter; whereas the dishonesty of a private man can only injure a few, 'that of a public writer, who has previously taught the multitude to respect his talents, perverts what is much more valuable, the mental progress of thousands; misleading, on the one hand, the shallow believers in his sincerity; and on the other, stigmatizing the whole literary character in the opinions of all who see through the veil of his venality'.¹⁸

¹⁸ Melincourt (1817), *ibid.*, Ch. 16, pp. 198-200.

The notion that the poets are the legislators of mankind is a Romantic gloss on an essentially eighteenth-century ideal; and in his analysis, Peacock has failed to locate the causes or the possible solutions to the problems he clearly sees, but sees in too generalised a way. There is no connexion between the arbiters of high culture and the social conditions of the masses; and in directing his main satiric thrust at the editors and reviewers of his time, Peacock reveals how deeply he was rooted in the values of the eighteenth century. It was left to the Romantic satire of Carlyle and Dickens to embody the nature of social dislocation in great and often humorous forms.

The refusal to face the problems of the nineteenth century represented by elements in Melincourt dominates Peacock's novel Crotchet Castle, published in the crisis year of 1831. The attacks by the representative of anti-modernism, Dr Folliott, on the March Of Mind, have much of Peacock's wit and verve; and, in many ways, the Modern Athenians were an easy target for Folliott's scorn:

MR MAC QUEDY...Laughter is an involuntary action of certain muscles, developed in the human species by the progress of civilisation. The savage never laughs.

THE REV. DR. FOLLIOTT. No, sir, he has nothing to laugh at. Give him Modern Athens, the 'learned friend', and the Steam Intellect Society. They will develop his muscles. 19

But there is a difference between witty satire and vigorous prejudice; and if indeed Folliott represents something like Peacock's final, embattled, position, prejudice and confusion have replaced thinking, and the retreat from the complexities of the problem, a pattern to be repeated in the careers of Carlyle and Ruskin, has begun in earnest. Sometimes our sympathy, indeed, goes to MacQuedy, a figure set up for satirical exposure, but who gets the better of the exchange with Folliott in which the Doctor, enraged by the depredations of the rural mobs, puts his finger on the causes of the unrest in the sentence, 'All this comes of education', to which MacQuedy replies, 'I rather think it comes of poverty'.²⁰ In Melincourt, Peacock had satirised the conception of the 'swinish multitude' as the cry of reactionary and terrified bigots;²¹ but in Crotchet Castle the mob appears, in the attack on Chainmail Hall headed by Captain Swing; and their activities are seen as the outcome of the March of Mind and the efforts of Brougham, the 'learned friend', whose efforts to spread the benefits of education have brought about new 'scientific' principles of robbery and the growing tendency among the servants to read, to the consequent neglect of their duties. In ascribing various social ills to the March of Mind, however, Folliott contradicts his general position on the influence of education, which is that education

²⁰ Ibid., Ch. 17, p. 747.

²¹ Melincourt, ibid., Ch. 31, p. 280.

is of very little importance in forming the personality, which is formed mainly through hereditary processes:

'I hold that there is every variety of natural capacity from the idiot to Newton and Shakespeare; the mass of mankind, midway between these extremes, being blockheads of different degrees; education leaving them pretty nearly as it found them, with this single difference, that it gives a fixed direction to their stupidity, a sort of incurable wry neck to the thing they call their understanding.' 22

Such confusion is symptomatic of Peacock's general tendency to lash out indiscriminately and arbitrarily at targets which often have very little connexion except an ability to be slickly labelled 'scientific'; a satirical attack on medical men who use corpses of murdered victims as 'subjects for science' is included in the incident in which Folliott is attacked by two robbers, whom he considers to be resurrectionists for no other reason than that Peacock wants to take a swipe at another aspect of the 'scientific' spirit; and in the same chapter, 'Science and Charity', he includes a satirical attack on collecting (useless) statistics on charitable institutions, another of Brougham's enterprises.

In Crotchet Castle, which contains some delightful humorous writing, Peacock finally reached the

breakdown which was always threatened by the uneasy copresence in his novels of a reactionary Augustan satirical spirit and a gift for inventing amiable foibles dominated by fixed ideas. In his penultimate novel, a sour, baffled, satirical asperity finally swamps the delightful humorous gift, and after such an expression of rancour and fear, Peacock could only lock himself in his library to await the final collapse of the social structure.

3

The roots of Byron's satirical vision, like those of Peacock's, lie in the eighteenth century. His first satirical poem, English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, is modelled on the satires of Pope, both in form, that of the rhyming couplet, and in content, an attack on the stupid scribblers and reviewers who create a dull and leaden age. Like Pope in The Dunciad, Byron covers a wide range of examples of the highly obscure, for bathetic effect, included among familiar names - those of Scott, Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. The poem is a very good pastiche, showing that Byron can deal with contemporary material in an old way, but it lacks the depth and moral authority of its model. There are, however, many amusing passages, perhaps the best of which is the ironically epic treatment of the proposed duel between Jeffrey and Moore (which failed to take place), in which the scenery of Edinburgh and its environs is

described as it reacts in sympathy with the great critic:

The Tolbooth felt - for marble sometimes can,
On such occasions, feel as much as man -
The Tolbooth felt defrauded of his charms,
If Jeffrey died, except within her arms:
Nay last, not least, on that portentous morn,
The sixteenth story, where himself was born,
His patrimonial garret, fell to ground,
And pale Edina shudder'd at the sound...²³

Byron shows that he can modulate convincingly into a tragic mode at the end of the passage on gaming, when he uses the death of his friend Falkland to suggest the fatal attraction and sordid futility of gambling:

While none but menials o'er the bed of death,
Wash thy red wounds, or watch thy wavering breath:
Traduced by liars, and forgot by all,
The mangled victim of a drunken brawl,
To live like Clodius, and like Falkland fall. ²⁴

At the end of his career, in The Vision of Judgement, Byron found his own voice, a colloquial, quicksilver and deadly manner for dealing with the issues of political and literary corruption; and The Vision is a perfect poem. A sustained and consistent tone of savage anger controls the often delightful comic material of the poem; there is no incongruity between the attacks on tyranny and literary corruption,

²³ English Bards and Scotch Reviewers (1809), Byron: Poetical Works, Oxford Standard Authors, Third (Revised) Edition (1970), p. 119, 476-83.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 122, 682-6.

and comic details such as the angel's spraining its wing in carrying Southey upwards, and the slipping into Heaven of the King at the end. The central theme of the poem is one to which Byron returned in Don Juan: the notion that it is the age of bought allegiance for corrupt principles of which Southey, devastatingly depicted as one who is willing to hire himself to anyone, is seen as typical. Typical of the hollowness of the age, too, is the funeral of George the Third, a sham evoking no genuine sorrow. This poem shows that, unlike Peacock, Byron had evolved a satirical manner exactly suited to the expression of his total personality, for which the imitations of Pope were the necessary training; and this manner, as deployed on the huge canvas of Don Juan, has certain features in common with Schlegel's concept of Romantic Irony.

Romantic Irony involves a constant balancing between opposite extremes, not in order to reconcile them, but to demonstrate that, in the chaotic flux of reality, they cannot be reconciled; it is an open-ended medium involving self-parody and the deliberate undermining of illusion, and demanding a simultaneous detachment from and involvement in the work on the part of the author. Schlegel's own definition suggests the restlessly modulating, unstable, and bewildering nature of the medium; in irony 'everything must be jest and yet seriousness, artless openness and yet deep dissimulation...It

contains and incites a feeling of the insoluble conflict of the absolute and the relative, of the impossibility and necessity of total communication. It is the freest of all liberties, for it enables us to rise above our own self!..²⁵

There is a fundamental conflict, too, between the content and the form of works of irony, in which there 'lives a real transcendental buffoonery. Their interior is permeated by the mood which surveys everything and rises infinitely above everything limited, even above the poet's own art, virtue, and genius; and their exterior form by the histrionic style of an ordinary good Italian buffo'.²⁶

Schlegel distinguishes between the dissolving and self-transcending mode of irony, and wit, which is a synthesising force, detecting resemblances between objects which seem to be unlike each other, so that 'Many a witty inspiration is like the surprising reunion of befriended thoughts after a long separation'.²⁷ Schlegel's wit corresponds to Coleridge's combining and synthesising Imagination and, in the closed nature of its activity, corresponds to Carlyle's humorous irony in Sartor Resartus, which pushes the reader into

²⁵ Friedrich Schlegel, Dialogue on Poetry, 1798-1800 and Literary Aphorisms, 1797-1800, translated by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), p. 131.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

accepting the premises of a closed moral scheme; the irony and 'transcendental buffoonery' of Sartor Resartus serve the cause of a series of moral imperatives and assertions, and do not create, as do Schlegel's Romantic Irony and Byron's variation on it, an infinite regress of self-cancelling alternatives. A comparison between Schlegel's definition of irony and Coleridge's definition of the Imagination has been well made by Dr D.C.Muecke; and Carlyle's irony in Sartor works in the same way as does Coleridge's Imagination:

A comparison of these two passages shows us that Coleridge, his thought dominated by concepts of subordination, reconciliation, and unity, has not fully emerged from the 'closed world', whereas Schlegel with his ironies of 'unresolved conflicts' is quite evidently governed by a concept of 'open-mindedness'. For Coleridge, the function of the imagination is, as it were, to enclose the chaotic world in a perfect harmonious sphere: For Schlegel, its function is to present the chaos and transcend it, and then to present the transcendence and transcend that, substituting for Coleridge's circle an upward and forward pointing arrow. 28

While Byron's ironies are certainly less metaphysically ambitious than Schlegel's, the presentation of various kinds of unresolved contradictions lies at the centre of their strategy. The operation of these ironies can be seen in action on the largest as well as the smallest scale in Don Juan, a poem in which at several points a theme is treated with

28 D.C.Muecke, The Compass of Irony, p.195.

straightforward savage indignation, while elsewhere such a seriousness of intention is denied. There can be no doubt of the seriousness of Byron's angry treatment of the ideas that writers and politicians are willing to be bought, to the sacrifice of their integrity; that the rule of Castlereagh is despotic, and that Wellington abets such despotism; that the poetry of the Lakers is trivial and banal; that war is a horrifying experience; and that upperclass life in England is dreadfully dull. Perhaps the most impressively sustained example of Byron's satirical anger is the opening section of Canto 12, in which a system of oppression is seen as having its roots in one idea, the power of money, an idea which is linked with the notion, expressed in the savage Dedication to Southey, that poets are now bought like commodities.

Byron can match the powerful handling of a satirical theme on a large scale with an equally successful treatment of such a theme on a small scale, in the space of one stanza. In a description of the lives of noblemen, Byron suggests, with something of his beloved Pope's concision of style, that a moral aspect of the age is typified in such dissipated lives:

They are young, but know not youth - it is anticipated;
 Handsome but wasted, rich without a sou;
 Their vigour in a thousand arms is dissipated;
 Their cash comes from, their wealth goes to a Jew;

Both senates see their nightly votes participated
 Between the tyrant's and the tribunes' crew;
 And having voted, dined, drank, gamed, and whored,
 The family vault receives another lord. 29

But the persona who can convey such powerful
 moral attacks can deny, in another part of the poem,
 that the poem has any serious intention at all, and can claim
 that the satire is of the mildest kind:

My natural temper's really aught but stern,
 And even my Muse's worst reproof's a smile;
 And then she drops a brief and modern curtsy,
 And glides away, assured she never hurts ye.
 (11, lxxiii, p. 796)

Such assertions undercut the passionately-felt
 satire against corruption and depravity; and the
 repeated claims that the poem is merely a series of
 rambling unconnected reflections and adventures:
 'I never know the word which will come next' (9,
 xli, p. 774): further undermine the sustained
 seriousness on which other sections insist. Any
 claims which the poem might make towards bringing
 about the moral improvement of the reader are presented
 with an air of embarrassed apology; and Byron's
 admission that he digresses contradicts an earlier
 assertion (1, vii, p. 638) that the poem will have a
 regular design:

²⁹ Don Juan (1819-24), Byron: Poetical Works, Canto 11,
 lxxv, p. 797. All further references to Don Juan
 are incorporated into the text.

Oh, pardon me digression - or at least
 Peruse! 'Tis always with a moral end
 That I dissert, like grace before a feast:
 For like an aged aunt, or tiresome friend,
 A rigid guardian, or a zealous priest,
 My Muse by exhortation means to mend
 All people, at all times, and in most places,
 Which puts my Pegasus to these grave paces,
(12,xxxix,p.803)

an assertion which in turn is ironically qualified
 by the next ironic statement:

But now I'm going to be immoral; now
 I mean to show things really as they are...
(12,xl,p.803)

In this 'versified Aurora Borealis' (7,ii,p.744),
 pose succeeds pose in an infinite regress of ironies;
 Byron is the outsider, 'of no party' (9,xxvi,p.772),
 a position from which the wayward character of the
 poem is generated:

No doubt, if I had wished to pay my court
 To critics, or to hail the setting sun
 Of tyranny of all kinds, my concision
 Were more; - but I was born for opposition. (15,xxii,
p.835)

The moral power of the savage satirical sections
 is further undermined by the assertion that the
 writer is merely holding up 'the nothingness of
 life' (7,vi,p.744), a view which he claims has been
 shared by many great writers of the past; and in this
 view, man is seen as a mass of contradictions which
 only an amorally ironical position, with its capacity
 for infinite contradiction, can account for. Something

of the paradoxical nature of Byron's view of mankind in general can be seen in the Haidée section of the poem, in which the seriousness of the passion of Juan and Haidée is undercut by various ironical devices which insist on the irreconcilable nature of the spiritual and the physical aspects of man's personality.

Byron treats the love of Juan and Haidée, on a serious level, as a profoundly desirable state of natural feeling akin to the primitive instincts of birds and naive children; they are not of the 'real world' (4,xv,p.700), and their love stands in stark opposition to the pressures endured by social man:

They should have lived together deep in woods,
 Unseen as sings the nightingale; they were
 Unfit to mix in these thick solitudes
 Call'd social, haunts of Hate, and Vice, and Care.
(4,xxviii,p.702)

When the real world, in the form of Haidée's father, breaks into the idyllic world of Juan and Haidée, the results are tragic: Haidée's death and Juan's renewed wanderings. But the idyllic world itself is constantly illuminated by the flickering light of Byron's irony, as trivial aspects of the real world disturb the primitive dream, and Byron belittles what he most admires as the poem moves in its characteristic fashion from 'romance' to

'burlesque' (4,iii,p.699). The process begins on board ship, when Juan's theatrically pathetic farewell to Spain is rendered ridiculous by a bout of seasickness, which gives Byron the opportunity of expounding one of his favourite contradictions, that between the spiritual and the physical in the human makeup, and of pointing out the consequent sense of incongruity which results from bringing them together:

Against all noble maladies he's bold,
But vulgar illnesses don't like to meet.
(2,xxii,p.663)

This is the juxtaposition with which the whole poem begins in the opening 'Fragment', in which Byron, recovering from a bout of drinking, calls for soda-water in order to compose himself for the spiritual task of writing his poem. This basic idea runs through the Haidée section; as Haidée bends over the sleeping Juan, Zoe is frying eggs for their breakfast; and, when he wakes, Juan's longing for a beef-steak triggers off three stanzas of digression on the subject of beef (2,cliv-clvi, pp.678-9). This in turn results in further sections on food, drink, and physical pleasures; a comparison between the ripple of waves and the cream on champagne leads to another digression in praise of 'wine and women, mirth and laughter' (to be followed by 'sermons and soda-water the day after'), and to two stanzas in praise of drink and getting drunk and the antidote,

hock and soda-water; and the account of the excitement of Juan's capture develops into an account of the properties of Bohea and punch (2,clxxviii-clxxx,p.681).

There are in this section, too, the kinds of juxtapositions which recall the wit of Pope; the pirate and the prime minister are brought together (3,xiv,p.687), and as the famished Juan recovers his appetite

He fell upon whate'er was offer'd, like
A priest, a shark, an alderman, or pike. (2,clvii,p.679)

Sometimes Byron uses a single word to suggest the idea of oppositions which cannot be reconciled; in a section in Canto 1, he begins by calling up pleasant associations (the sights and sounds of nature, the welcome home after a journey) by the use of the word 'sweet'; but 'sweet' also are drunkenness, money to the miser, the revenge of women, an unexpected legacy, and first love; and from the opposite associations called up by one word, Byron moves on to an account of the age of 'opposite discoveries':

What opposite discoveries we have seen!
 (Signs of true genius, and of empty pockets.)
One makes new noses, one a guillotine,
 One breaks your bones, one sets them in their sockets;
But vaccination certainly has been
 A kind antithesis to Congreve's rockets,
With which the Doctor paid off an old pox,
By borrowing a new one from an ox. (1,cxxix,p.651)

But for all the startling nature of its activity, the kind of irony employed by Byron in Don Juan did not take root in England and form the beginning of a tradition. Neither did the Richterian, moral, irony of Sartor Resartus; but the importance of Carlyle's one humorous masterpiece is that it brought to a final development the moral tendency of humour as interpreted in Romantic theories of humour. The nature of these theories, and a discussion of Sartor Resartus, form the subjects of the next two chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR.'INVERSE SUBLIMITY': ROMANTICTHEORIES OF HUMOUR

1

The tendency of humorous writing embodied in the treatment of the character of the amiable foible of the eighteenth century, and the consequent development of this character along sociological lines, by Edgeworth, Scott, and Galt, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were the main threads by which what has been called moral humour was conveyed. Humour sought, by the sympathetic presentation of eccentricities and foibles of character, to create in the reader a sympathy for socially unacceptable behaviour which represented valuable virtues such as naturalness of feeling and goodness of heart, in a similarly sympathetic context of low life, in which such qualities were allowed to flourish without inhibition. This tendency, embodied in the humorous characters of Fielding and Sterne in the eighteenth century, was carried on in the first half of the nineteenth century in the work of Scott and Dickens, acquiring in the novels of the latter a more insistent social dimension, as we are exhorted to sympathise with the unfortunate and the socially incompetent, and, finally, with the deranged and the insane. The moral direction of such a sensibility is a social direction, and becomes more so as the century progresses.

In the theoretical remarks about humour of the writers of the period 1800 to 1850, humour is seen as a medium of moral sympathy, of social concern, and, in its apotheosis in the Germanic theorising of Carlyle, of metaphysical aspiration. This chapter attempts to trace the development of the theory of humour in the first half of the nineteenth century, by discussing Scott's exaltation of ordinary life and natural feelings; the revaluation of Hogarth by Coleridge and Lamb, so that he becomes a kindly satirist; the interpretations of Richter by De Quincey and Carlyle, in which humour is exalted to ultimate moral heights; the further sentimentalising of humour's moral function by Thackeray; the reworking of Carlyle's theories by Forster in his defence of Dickens; and the problem of the grotesque mode of humour, of which Romantic writers were suspicious. This discussion of the grotesque leads on to the subject of Chapter Five, the greatest example of the humorous moral grotesque of the period: Carlyle's Sartor Resartus.

2

In an opening statement of his lectures on the English humorists of the eighteenth century, delivered in 1851, Thackeray offered a definition of the humorous writer which stands as the high point of the theoretical discussion of the humorist as

moralist. The humorist is seen as the bearer of a morally sympathetic sensibility, by which our feelings of pity for suffering and scorn for oppression are directed; the definition is extremely general, marking the sentimentalisation of the humorist which Thackeray helped to encourage to an extent even beyond the sentimental view of Carlyle, and it does no justice to the growing subtlety of Thackeray's own humour in his novels up to Vanity Fair; yet it offered the lecturer's audience the kind of assurance which had been built up for half a century about the role of the humorist as moral commentator:

The humorous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness - your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture - your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy. To the best of his means and ability he comments on all the ordinary actions and passions of life almost. He takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher, so to speak...¹

The essential feature of humour, that it is a reconciling force, searching for affinities, by which disparate and potentially antagonistic elements in both the imagination and society are brought together in a harmonious whole, was increasingly emphasised by the Romantics. Humour, like the Imagination in

¹ Lectures on the English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century (1851), The Centenary Biographical Edition of the Works of William Makepeace Thackeray, 1910-11, vol. 11, p. 128. All further references to Thackeray's works are to this edition.

Coleridge's description of it, is a dynamic and dialectical force, a feature which the interpretations of De Quincey and Carlyle emphasise, effecting the 'balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities' (blending, for example, the pathetic and the ludicrous, or the ridiculous and the sublime, as Scott blended them in his humorous characters). Brought into balance, too, are the 'individual, with the representative', in the humorous characters of Fielding, Sterne, and Scott; and in later humorous writing, particularly that of Dickens, was to be brought about a reconciliation between 'the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects',² a more problematic mode of humour, since it often involved recourse to the grotesque.

But the hopes of achieving some kind of imaginative synthesis and, ultimately, of offering some kind of social optimism, which lay behind much of the earnest theorising about humour, were as short-lived as they were intense. Carlyle, who attempted a major work of social analysis through Richterian humorous irony in Sartor Resartus, abandoned humorous writing after this first experiment; and the two leading humorists of the late 1830s and the 1840s, Thackeray and Dickens, developed modes of humorous apprehension of reality which were far removed from the orthodox theoretical recommendations

² Biographia Literaria, Ch.14, p.174.

about humour of the same period. Neither Dickens's fascinating grotesque idealisations nor Thackeray's cynical questioning of moral values by humorous irony could effect the kinds of reconciling purposes which George Eliot still believed essential to the writer's vision; so her own brief humorous excursions were quickly abandoned for methods which both Austen, with her rigorously dismissive view of humour, and the Mrs Gaskell of Cranford, in which humour is distilled into pathos, served to suggest.

In his professions of sympathy for ordinary people, a cornerstone in the edifice of humour as it developed from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, Scott appealed to the examples of both Wordsworth and Maria Edgeworth. In Guy Mannering and The Antiquary, Scott claimed, he had sought his

principal personages in the class of society who are the last to feel the influence of that general polish which assimilates to each other the manners of different nations. Among the same class I have placed some of the scenes in which I have endeavoured to illustrate the operation of higher and more violent passions; both because the lower orders are less restrained by the habit of suppressing their feelings, and because I agree with my friend Wordsworth, that they seldom fail to express them in the strongest and most powerful language. 3

In his Post-script to Waverley, Scott announced his intention, by means of his Scottish characters,

³ Introduction to The Antiquary, The Waverley Novels, vol.2, p.1.

of getting away from fictional stereotypes in favour of a more realistic presentation of life, 'so as in some distant degree to emulate the admirable Irish portraits drawn by Miss Edgeworth',⁴ and in the General Preface of 1829, he remarks that one of the considerations which persuaded him to persevere with Waverley itself was 'the extended and well-merited fame' of Miss Edgeworth, whose sympathetic account of Irish characters had made the English familiar with their neighbours in a way which might also be followed for the people of Scotland:

Without being so presumptuous as to hope to emulate the rich humour, pathetic tenderness, and admirable tact, which pervade the works of my accomplished friend, I felt that something might be attempted for my own country of the same kind with that which Miss Edgeworth so fortunately achieved for Ireland - something which might introduce her natives to those of the sister kingdom in a more favourable light than they had been placed hitherto, and tend to procure sympathy for their virtues and indulgence for their foibles,

a scheme for which Scott could draw on his extensive knowledge of 'all ranks of my countrymen, from the Scottish peer to the Scottish ploughman'.⁵

The preference for natural feeling over artificial and conventional manners involved in

⁴ Waverley, The Waverley Novels, vol. 1, p. 449.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

this enterprise emerges powerfully in the context of Guy Mannering itself, in an exchange between Mannering and his daughter Julia, on the subject of Dominie Sampson, whom Julia had just met. Her response to the uncouth Sampson is the predictable, and understandable, one of someone who has been bred in the fashionable world: ' "this is a most original parson - why, dear sir, no human being will be able to look at him without laughing" ': but her father warns her that she must restrain her mirth: ' "Mr Sampson is a man whom I esteem for his simplicity and benevolence of character... though Mr Sampson has certainly not sacrificed to the graces, there are many things in this world more truly deserving of ridicule than either awkwardness of manners or simplicity of character".' ⁶

There was, according to Lockhart, a similar real-life exchange between Scott and his daughter, in which Anne had used the word 'vulgar' in a tone of contempt, to which her father had replied:

... 'do you know, after all, the meaning of this word vulgar? 'Tis only common; nothing that is common, except wickedness, can deserve to be spoken of in a tone of contempt; and when you have lived to my years, you will be disposed to agree with me in thanking God that nothing really worth having or caring about in this world is uncommon';

⁶ Guy Mannering (1815), The Waverley Novels, vol. 1, Ch. 20, pp. 139-140.

and Lockhart also records a conversation between Scott and Maria Edgeworth, in which Scott expressed his preference for the utterances of the uneducated over those of the educated in terms similar to Wordsworth's own; and the 'higher sentiments' to which he refers are often to be found coming from the lips of the uneducated in his own novels:

'I have read books enough, and observed and conversed with enough of eminent and splendidly cultivated minds, too, in my time; but I assure you, I have heard higher sentiments from the lips of poor uneducated men and women, when exerting the spirit of severe yet gentle heroism under difficulties and afflictions, or speaking their simple thoughts as to circumstances in the lot of friends and neighbours, than I have ever yet met without of the pages of the Bible. We shall never learn to feel and respect our real calling and destiny, unless we have taught ourselves to consider everything as moonshine, compared with the education of the heart'. 7

3

Humour's reconciling function was represented in another way in the revaluation of the work of Hogarth by Coleridge and Lamb, in which the artist was seen as a kindly satirist, who blended together the pathetic and the terrible in his pictures, to suggest the complexity of real life. In this way, Shakespeare had combined tragedy and comedy to more

⁷ Lockhart, Life of Sir Walter Scott (1838, abridged version of 1848, Everyman's Library edition 1906), Ch. 13, pp. 472-3.

perfectly reflect the flux of reality, Scott had blended disparate qualities in his humorous characters, and Dickens was to do the same things in his novels, as his admirers discovered. The Romantic reassessment of Hogarth reversed the typically rigid eighteenth century view as represented by the remarks of William Gilpin in his 'Essay Upon Prints' of 1768, in which the praise for Hogarth's satire, morality, powers of design, and truth to nature is tempered by the observation that Hogarth's genius could only deal with low subjects;⁸ but this was seen by the Romantics not as a weakness, but as a strength. Lamb's essay of 1811, 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth', is partly an attack on the habit of ranking paintings by their subject matter, so that an historical painting is judged greater than a painting of low life, and partly a reinterpretation of Hogarth. In the essay, Lamb quotes a comment on Hogarth by Coleridge in The Friend of two years earlier, in which Coleridge remarks that the blending of the satirist and the poet, or lover of beauty, in Hogarth, guides our response to human frailty in a kindly direction, a process by which we become reconciled to weaknesses exposed by the satirist through the copresence of equally powerful elements of beauty in, on this occasion, a Hogarthian card-playing session, observed by Coleridge; Hogarth himself

⁸ Excerpts from William Gilpin's 'Essay Upon Prints' (1768), in Frank Bradbrook, Jane Austen and her Predecessors (1966), Appendix 4, pp. 158-65.

never drew a more ludicrous distortion both of attitude and physiognomy...nor was there wanting beside it one of those beautiful female faces which the same Hogarth, in whom the Satyrist never extinguished that love of beauty which belonged to him as a Poet, so often and so gladly introduces as the central figure in a crowd of humorous deformities, which figure (such is the power of true genius!) neither acts, nor is meant to act as a contrast; but diffuses through all, and over each of the group, a spirit of reconciliation and human kindness; and even when the attention is no longer consciously directed to the cause of this feeling, still blends its' tenderness with our laughter: and thus prevents the instructive merriment at the whim of nature or the foibles or humours of our fellow-men from degenerating into the heart-poison of contempt or hatred. 9

Lamb, in continuing to detach Hogarth from an exclusively satirical interpretation, agreed with Coleridge that Hogarth, far from being simply a stern castigator of vice and folly, had a kindly warmth for the humours of mankind; and even in his most terrible pictures, such as the last two of the 'Rake's Progress' series, he employs a mixed effect, so that, as in King Lear, there is presented 'an assortment of the ludicrous with the terrible'. As in life, the tragic and the comic are found, not separately, but in combination:

It is the force of these kindly admixtures, which assimilates the scenes of Hogarth and of Shakespeare to the drama of real life, where no such thing as pure tragedy is to be found; but merriment and infelicity, ponderous crime and feather-like vanity, like twiformed births,

⁹ The Friend, No.16 (Dec.7 1809), The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, vol.4, The Friend, 2, edited by Barbara E. Rooke (1969), p.213.

disagreeing complexions of one intertexture,
perpetually unite to shew forth motley
spectacles to the world. 10

In his own, later, discussion of the artist,
Hazlitt followed Lamb, in his remarks that Hogarth's
faces have 'all the truth of nature', and that
Hogarth's power is that of 'embodying the serious
and the ludicrous; but these contradictory faculties
were reconciled in Hogarth, as they were in Shakespeare,
in Chaucer'.¹¹ He quotes Lamb's remark on Hogarth's
imaginative ability to draw all things into one, in
the treatment of the houses in 'Gin Lane', which are
'tumbling all about in various directions...(they)
seem absolutely reeling from the effect of that
diabolical spirit of phrenzy which goes forth over
the whole composition'.¹² Generally, too, objects
have a life of their own in a Hogarth picture; there
is 'the dumb rhetoric of the scenery - for tables,
and chairs, and joint-stools in Hogarth, are living
and significant things'.¹³

And just as Hogarth was compared to Shakespeare
by Lamb and Hazlitt for that quality of genius by
which the serious and the comical were mixed so as
to produce a closer approximation to reality than
was possible by keeping the genres separate, so

¹⁰ 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth' (1811),
Works, vol. 1, Miscellaneous Prose (1798-1834), p. 89.

¹¹ Hazlitt, Lectures on the English Comic Writers (1819),
Works, vol. 6, p. 144.

¹² Lamb, Works, vol. 1, p. 86 (quoted Hazlitt, Works, vol. 6,
p. 142).

¹³ Ibid., p. 98-9.

Dickens was compared to Hogarth. It was pointed out by R.H.Horne, in his essay on Dickens of 1844, that there is, in the characters and scenes of this novelist, a blending of the serious and the comical, pervaded, as in Hogarth, by a 'harmonising atmosphere'.¹⁴ This harmonisation was achieved by Hogarth, according to Lamb, by the use of children, as well as female figures, in 'The March to Finchley' and 'The Harlot's Funeral', to impart tranquillity and innocence to an otherwise sordid subject; and he compares the face of the good woman at the pawnbroker's shop in 'Gin Lane' with the exorcising power of Parson Adams. Indeed, like Fielding, Hogarth is seen by Lamb as a lover of mankind, who celebrated the diversity of man's humours in a kindly spirit, inviting our cordial laughter, as does Fielding at the simplicities of Adams, 'where a sense of the ridiculous mutually kindles and is kindled by a perception of the amiable'.¹⁵

Dickens knew and admired the work of Hogarth, praising 'Gin Lane' for its grasp of the causes of drunkenness in the 'neglected classes',¹⁶ and maintaining, in the 1841 Preface to Oliver Twist, that it was Hogarth, 'the moralist, and censor of his age' who alone among painters told the truth

¹⁴ A New Spirit of the Age, edited by R.H.Horne (1844), vol. 1, p. 7.

¹⁵ Lamb, loc. cit., p. 100.

¹⁶ Forster, Life of Dickens, Book 6, Ch. 3, p. 491.

about the degraded lives of criminals.¹⁷ It was in Oliver Twist, too, that Dickens defended the presentation of alternate scenes of comedy and drama, like 'the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon', in order to emulate the transitions which actually occur in real life;¹⁸ thus he joins the tradition of Shakespeare and Hogarth, of which the Romantics approved in their desire to fuse genres together on behalf of a greater verisimilitude.

But there was a more damaging way in which Dickens and Hogarth came to be associated; the charge that Dickens, like Hogarth, was merely a clever caricaturist came to be insisted on more and more. Forster found the charge to some extent true, was clearly embarrassed by its force, and gets himself into something of a mess in extricating Dickens from the accusation. In defining the delicate process of perceiving 'relations in things which are not apparent generally', Forster, admitting that Dickens sometimes substituted the merely grotesque for the truthful (as if the former excluded the latter), thus capitulated to the realists' criteria. Defence turns into apology when he maintains that this tendency towards the grotesque in Dickens was

¹⁷ Oliver Twist (1838, The Clarendon Edition, 1966), p.lxiv.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Ch.17, pp.105-6.

but 'a splendid excess of his genius', which had unfortunately come 'to be objected to as its integral and essential quality';¹⁹ and this typical uneasiness about the status of the grotesque will be returned to at the end of this chapter.

Much of Lamb's own humorous writing exhibits the perpetually uniting admixtures of the pathetic and the comic which he found in Shakespeare and Hogarth, and its restless modulations of tone often anticipate the work of the first part of Dickens's career, especially some of the Sketches by Boz and The Old Curiosity Shop. In the Essays of Elia, Lamb presents himself as the humorous observer of the quaint and odd humours of others; he whimsically dwells on themes of childhood, antiquity, dreams, revealing anecdotes, and odd humours, in essays which often bring out the blending of contradictory principles in the humorous character. His cousin James has such a contradictory personality: 'The genuine child of impulse, the frigid philosopher of prudence - the phlegm of my cousin's doctrine is invariably at war with his temperament, which is high sanguine.'²⁰ The clerk John Tipp (like Wemmick) is two people; in the office he is methodical and unromantic, but his suppressed romantic impulse finds vent when he sings with a choir.²¹ Captain

¹⁹Forster, op.cit., Book 9, Ch. 1, p. 722.

²⁰'My Relations', Works, vol. 2, Essays of Elia and Last Essays of Elia (1823-33), p. 82.

²¹'The South-Sea House', ibid., pp. 5-6.

Jackson, like Swiveller and Micawber, refuses to acknowledge his poverty, and creates an elaborate fantasy of wealth through his linguistic facility (he calls the tea kettle an 'urn', the bench a 'sofa' and so on), and he 'overflowed all bounds by the force of a magnificent self-delusion'.²²

Samuel Salt's gravity and reputation for being a very clever man are constantly belied by his appalling social errors; when he dines with a relative of the unfortunate Miss Blandy who is to be executed on that day, despite the careful preparations to ensure that he should not mention this event, 'he got up, looked out of window, and pulling down his ruffles - an ordinary motion with him - observed, "it was a gloomy day", and added, "Miss Blandy must be hanged by this time, I suppose"'.²³

By contrast with the orthodox taste of his cousin Bridget, Lamb explains that 'Out-of-the-way humours and opinions - heads with some diverting twist in them - the oddities of authorship please me most',²⁴ and a whole essay is sometimes planned to modulate between a humorously whimsical and a pathetic tone. The essay on 'Poor Relations' begins with a comical-irritable out-burst against poor relations generally, continues by evoking the comic embarrassment caused by the visits of male and female poor relations, and

²² 'Captain Jackson', *ibid.*, p. 218.

²³ 'The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple', *ibid.*, pp. 98-9.

²⁴ 'Mackery End, in Hertfordshire', *ibid.*, p. 86.

moves into a pathetic account of a young man whom Lamb knew at Oxford whose sensitivity to his poverty, exacerbated by his servile father's residence in the town, drove from the University to join a regiment in whose service he died; Lamb comments on his subject:

I do not know how, upon a subject which I began with treating half seriously, I should have fallen upon a recital so eminently painful; but this theme of poor relationship is replete with so much matter for tragic as well as comic associations, that it is difficult to keep the account distinct without blending. 25

Like Lamb, De Quincey saw humour as the blending of opposite qualities, and he outlined his theory in his essay on Richter of 1821. But De Quincey was a humorous writer too, and the discussion of his Richter essay, which leads on to an assessment of the same writer's humour by Carlyle, will follow a brief account of De Quincey's most famous, and best, humorous piece, 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts' (1827 and 1839). Swift's 'Modest Proposal' is the model for De Quincey's exercise in bad taste, in which the aesthetic aspects of murder are ironically expounded with the help of obscure authorities. De Quincey claims to have got hold of a copy of 'The Williams Lecture on Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts': Williams was a great murderer whose crimes are described in a Postscript of 1854. Murder is considered aesthetically

as a matter of 'Taste and the Fine Arts' in an historical survey of the highlights of the crime, which are the medieval Jewish school ('respectable'), the Assassins of the Dark Ages, the period 1588 to 1635 when there were seven Royal assassinations ('3 Majesties, 3 Serene Highnesses, and 1 Excellency'),²⁶ and recent times, which included the 'sublimest' murders of Williams, the rather over-rated murder of Weare by Thurtell ('there was something falsetto in the style of Thurtell'),²⁷ and the murder, or near-murder, of some modern philosophers, including Descartes, nearly murdered aboard ship; Kant, spared by the aesthetic sense of his potential murderer, who saw in time that there was no point in killing 'an old, arid, and adust metaphysician';²⁸ and Hobbes, who should have been murdered in conformity with his own theories:

Hobbes - but why, or on what principle, I never could understand - was not murdered. This was a capital oversight of the professional men in the seventeenth century; because in every light he was a fine subject for murder, except, indeed, that he was lean and skinny; for I can prove that he had money, and (what is very funny) he had no right to make the least resistance; since, according to himself, irresistible power creates the very highest species of right, so that it is rebellion of the blackest dye to refuse to be murdered when a competent force appears to murder you. 29

²⁶ The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, edited by David Masson (1897), vol. 13, Tales and Prose Phantasies, p. 23.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 28-9.

In his essay on Richter, which antedates the first of Carlyle's three essays on the German writer by some six years, De Quincey claimed that Richter's pre-eminence as a humorist lay in his ability to blend the pathetic and the humorous into one element: 'The pathetic and the humorous are but different phases of the same orb; they assist each other, melt indiscernibly into each other, and often shine each through each like layers of coloured crystals placed one behind another.' ³⁰

De Quincey sees humour, in theory, as a dynamic process, and the vocabulary of 'blending' and 'fusing' which he uses to describe its operation is similar to the vocabulary which Coleridge uses in describing the operation of the Imagination, which dissolves elements in order to recreate them. The 'synthetic and magical power' by which Coleridge's poet 'diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses' various elements together, and which is revealed in the 'balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities', is recalled in De Quincey's account of humour, which is a process of 'blending, or fusing, as it were, the elements of pathos and of humour, and composing out of their union a third metal sui generis', ³¹ an illustration of which is the blended pathos and humour of Mrs Quickly's account of the death of Falstaff. De Quincey claims that Richter is even greater than

³⁰ 'John Paul Frederick Richter' (1821), Collected Writings, vol. 1, Literary Theory and Criticism, p. 263.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 264-5.

Sterne in his command over the 'interpenetration' of humour and pathos, since he can continually reconcile contraries by the restless modulations of his wide-ranging mind: 'John Paul's intellect, - his faculty of catching at a glance all the relations of objects, both the grand, the lovely, the ludicrous, and the fantastic, - is painfully and almost morbidly active.' ³²

Richter is humorous rather than witty: wit is intellectual, logical, and circumscribed, whereas humour is moral and diffusive, 'pervading an entire course of thoughts':³³ and his satire is kindly, as is that of Hogarth according to Coleridge and Lamb. This kindliness was a feature which Carlyle was to stress: 'Everywhere a spirit of kindness prevails: his satire is everywhere playful, delicate, and clad in smiles, - never bitter, scornful, or malignant.' ³⁴

In his essays on Richter (and in those on Burns and Schiller), Carlyle defines humour in terms of the tradition which we have been examining. Richter's humour is based on love, and is a dynamic blending of the comic and the pathetic; and Carlyle includes the concept of 'inverse sublimity', which is a

³² Ibid., p. 267.

³³ Ibid., p. 270.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 271.

translation of Richter's phrase 'das umgekehrte Erhabene',³⁵ in his analysis of Richter's humour, a concept which has social implications, since by its operation humour bathes 'what is below us' in the light of sympathy; and it was this idea which Forster was to adapt in his own account of the genial humour of Dickens.

Richter is a great humorist, in Carlyle's account, because his humour springs from a tender love for the whole of Creation, a quality which he shares with Burns in some of that poet's moods. Richter

is a man of feeling, in the noblest sense of that word; for he loves all living with the heart of a brother; his soul rushes forth, in sympathy with gladness and sorrow, with goodness or grandeur, over all Creation... Love...is the atmosphere he breathes in, the medium through which he looks...The essence of humour is sensibility; warm, tender fellow-feeling with all forms of existence. 36

In some of the poems of Burns, too, the poet's feelings of love for nature are expressed through humour, and Carlyle chooses as examples of the humour of Burns (which he distinguishes from his 'bold and often irresistible faculty of caricature; for this is Drollery rather than Humour') three poems about humble animals: 'To a Mouse', 'The

³⁵ G.B. Tennyson, Sartor Called Resartus (Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 277.

³⁶ 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1827), Works, vol. 26, pp. 15-16.

Farmer's Mare', and the elegy on his pet sheep, 'Poor Mailie's Elegy'. Carlyle analyses Burns's humour in terms similar to those he uses about Richter; Burns is 'brother and playmate to all Nature', and 'a much tenderer sportfulness dwells in him';³⁷ and in each of the poems mentioned by Carlyle, Burns identifies himself with the animal, most famously in his address to the mouse, thus reconciling the low and the high.

Richter's humour, as in De Quincey's account, is that fusion of the comic and the pathetic which combine to form the third quality in a dialectical process: 'But in his smile itself a touching pathos may lie hidden, a pity too deep for tears'.³⁸ As explained in the Burns essay, the harmonious blending can give the humour the effect of sunshine: 'a deep genial Humour lay, like warm sunshine, softening the whole, blending the whole into light sportful harmony';³⁹ and Richter is compared to Cervantes and Sterne in the power and quality of his humour.

When Carlyle comes to deal with the subjects of Richter's humour, he makes a central Romantic statement about humour, leading, through a restatement of the notions that humour is based on love and is a mixture of qualities, to the idea of inverse sublimity, which

³⁷ 'Burns' (1828), Works, vol. 26, p. 283.

³⁸ 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1827), Works, vol. 26, p. 15.

³⁹ 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter Again' (1830), Works, vol. 27 (Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, vol. 2), p. 121.

Forster was to exhume over forty years later in his account of Dickens's humour:

True humour springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love; it issues not in laughter, but in still smiles, which lie far deeper. It is a sort of inverse sublimity; exalting, as it were, into our affections what is below us, while sublimity draws down into our affections what is above us. 40

In Carlyle's essay on Schiller, the definition of humour is essentially the same as that in the Burns and Richter essays, except that for the phrase 'what is below us', Carlyle substitutes the phrase 'low things', which are rendered poetical to the mind by humour, adding that 'The man of Humour sees common life, even mean life, under the new light of sportfulness and love; whatever has existence has a charm for him'.⁴¹ It was in the light of Richter's theories of humour that Carlyle wrote his own humorous masterpiece, Sartor Resartus, in which humour is a comprehensive, dialectical method of apprehending the totality of reality, revealing the nature of Man's place in the Universe in its ceaseless modulations, moving between the poles of 'what is above us' and 'what is below us' in terms of the Transcendental and the Descendental, the infinite and the finite, and the ideal and the real.

⁴⁰ Works, vol.26, p.17.

⁴¹ 'Schiller' (1831), Works, vol.27, p.200.

Thackeray's Westminster Review essay of 1840 on George Cruickshank extends and develops some of the themes outlined in the discussion of Scott's comments on common life, the reassessment of Hogarth, and Carlyle's reading of Richter, and points the way to the even greater sentimentalising and generalising of the function of humour which emerge ten years later in Thackeray's lectures on the eighteenth century humorists. Cruickshank is, for Thackeray, an artist pre-eminently associated with childhood; the opening of the essay contrasts the vanity and selfishness of the adult world with the innocent, specifically Wordsworthian, childhood world which Cruickshank illuminated. Through the medium of his early memories of seeing Cruickshank's prints, Thackeray defines him as a 'friend of the young especially',⁴² one who has pity for the little ones, and one whose kindly humour shows his love for children. He is, too, a popular humorist, whose essential qualities of sincerity and honesty resemble Hogarth's, as do, more precisely, his attacks on religious hypocrisy; and like Hogarth in the view of Lamb, he is basically a kindly humorist.

Cruikshank's creative energy and range, according to Thackeray, contrast with the insipid productions of fashionable Academy painters (recalling Lamb's

⁴² 'George Cruickshank' (1840), Works, vol. 23, p. 397.

preference for Hogarth's, as opposed to Academy, pictures); he is a truly democratic artist, a 'man of the people',⁴³ manly and patriotic, 'a fine rough English diamond';⁴⁴ we have returned to the idea that the humorist is patriotic. His work produces a mixed reaction; he is able to combine the awful and the ridiculous, but any ugliness in his work is always modified by a 'sly touch of beauty',⁴⁵ as Coleridge and Lamb claimed of Hogarth's work. And like Carlyle's Richter, Cruickshank shows a love for all mankind, and an ability to illuminate ordinary life in the light of his 'good and benevolent' humour.⁴⁶ The essay on Cruickshank is an early manifestation of Thackeray's conception of the humorist as the 'weekday preacher', whose function is to spread tolerance and love for one's fellow men, as well as to exhibit such virtues as manly honesty and patriotism; this broadening and coarsening of the nature and function of the humorist is carried further in Thackeray's later discussions in his lectures on the humorists of the eighteenth century and in his lecture on Charity and Humour of 1852.

⁴³ Ibid., p.415.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.454.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.398.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.446.

The notion of the humorist as a 'weekday preacher' appears in its fully developed form in the 1852 lecture, in a definition which conveys nothing of the ambiguous subtlety and subversive ironical power of humour as it is deployed in Vanity Fair; all the sting has been taken out of it in its anodyne, abstract formulation:

Besides contributing to our stock of happiness, to our harmless laughter and amusement, to our scorn for falsehood and pretension, to our righteous hatred of hypocrisy, to our education in the perception of truth, our love of honesty, our knowledge of life, and shrewd guidance through the world, have not our humorous writers, our gay and kind weekday preachers, done much in the support of that holy cause which has assembled you in this place...the cause of love and charity, the cause of the poor, the weak, and the unhappy; the sweet mission of love and tenderness, and peace and good will towards men? That same theme which is urged upon you by the eloquence and example of good men to whom you are delighted listeners on Sabbath-days, is taught in his way and according to his power by the humorous writer, the commentator on every-day life and manners. 47

In making the familiar connexion between laughter and tears, Thackeray again pushes humour further in the direction of simple sentimentality, in a crude comparison between comedy and tragedy; humour is

an irresistible sympathiser; it surprises you into compassion: you are laughing and disarmed, and suddenly forced into tears... Humour! humour is the mistress of tears; she knows the way to the fons lachrymarum, strikes in dry and rugged places with her enchanting wand, and bids the fountain gush and sparkle.

47 Charity and Humour (1852), Works, vol. 11, pp. 349-50.

She has refreshed myriads more from her natural springs than ever tragedy has watered from her pompous old urn. 48

In the lecture, Thackeray briefly sets out his preferences in the field of humorous writing which he had expounded at greater length in his lectures on the English humorists of the eighteenth century, and in which the test of approval was whether we would have liked to live with the writer. He admires Addison, Steele, Fielding, and Goldsmith, has a wary respect for Swift, and finds Congreve's plays cold and immoral; among modern writers, Hood and the genial Dickens are singled out for praise. The personalised, impressionistic approach adopted in the longer English Humourists lectures clearly has its limits and its pitfalls: Swift's 'Modest Proposal' springs, according to Thackeray, from his dislike of children:⁴⁹ but it can, on occasion, brilliantly indicate the writer's preferences; there is an extended image in which Congreve's plays are seen as the relics of a pagan orgy, plays without love, without feeling, and committed to immorality.⁵⁰ In general, Thackeray's dislike of 'cold' wit is opposed to the 'pure sunshine',⁵¹ of that great preacher Addison, or the 'manliness' of Fielding, forgiven for his lack of firm moral principles.⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 359.

⁴⁹ The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century, *ibid.*, pp. 148-9.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 170-1.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 179.

⁵² Ibid., p. 300.

The end of the conception of the humour of moral sympathy and the various cultural resonances which it accumulated over half a century is not to be found in the theory of Thackeray, decadent as it is; the real final throes of this conception are perhaps rather to be found in the account by Forster, in his biography of Dickens, of the humour of that writer, which is based on Carlyle's account of the humour of Richter. In Forster's account, a not very well-conducted defence of Dickens's methods, we find the last occasion on which large claims are made for humour as a means of reconciling opposites in the manner of Coleridge's *Imagination*, and of reconciling man with man along lines suggested by Carlyle. By the 1870s, the attacks on Dickens on both political and artistic grounds had been gathering force for twenty years, dating from the time when Dickens began to express an urgent social concern, exploring in his novels the emotionally catastrophic effects of living in a society in which many relationships were now a matter of the cash nexus. Forster's main defence of Dickens's artistic procedures is based on a highly selective account of Dickens's humour, described, quite rightly, as his leading quality. Humour is seen in familiar terms: it reconciles opposites, showing us our common humanity in its search for affinities; it is superior to pictures of 'mere character or manners'; and it exhibits in its operation what Carlyle described as 'inverse sublimity':

To perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally, is one of those exquisite properties of humour by which are discovered the affinities between the high and the low, the attractive and the repulsive, the rarest things and things of every day, which bring us all upon the level of a common humanity. It is this which gives humour an immortal touch that does not belong of necessity to pictures, even the most exquisite, of mere character or manners; the property which in its highest aspects Carlyle so subtly described as a sort of inverse sublimity, exalting into our affections what is below us as the other draws down into our affections what is above us. 53

Humour exalts into our affection what is below us partly by disturbing the 'normal' view of eccentric behaviour by indicating its universal representativeness: have we not all found ourselves waiting for something to turn up? Dickens's art, like that of Fielding, is seen as 'the art...which can combine traits vividly true to particular men or women with propensities common to all mankind';⁵⁴ but in such a process, Forster admits, sometimes the element of the grotesque will be predominant, and what is produced is merely exaggeration, without the essential representativeness which humour demands. But these 'grotesque imaginings to which great humourists are prone', are turned by Forster into a source by which the central social purpose of humour is carried out, that process by which the humorist demonstrates to the world of conventional responses that what it casually regards as eccentric or extreme behaviour is worthy of its attention and

⁵³ The Life of Dickens, Book 9, Ch. 1, p. 721.

⁵⁴ Ibid., Book 9, Ch. 1, p. 722.

its love; so the 'grotesque imaginings' of the humorists are the source from which 'they derive their genial sympathy with eccentric characters that enables them to find motives for what to other men is hopelessly obscure, to exalt into types of humanity what the world turns impatiently aside at, and to enshrine in a form for eternal homage and love such whimsical absurdity as Captain Toby Shandy's'.⁵⁵

This is indeed 'to render Dickens harmless by trivialising him',⁵⁶ by emasculating his grotesque imagination, which was often not the source of genial insights into gentle whimsicalities of behaviour, but into monstrous cruelties and warped psychologies, and by embalming it in the pieties of the moral tradition of the amiable foible. The grotesque humour of Dickens, one of the central strengths of his whole writing, can encompass in its range such diverse kinds of character as Swiveller and Quilp, Chuffey and Mrs Gamp, and it represents Dickens's fullest use of the resources of the language in its mounting inventiveness.

But Forster's nervousness about admitting the existence of the terrible and violent grotesque,

⁵⁵ Ibid., Book 9, Ch.1, p.727.

⁵⁶ Peter Conrad, The Victorian Treasure-House (1973), p.39.

in the clumsy attempt to convince us that the grotesque was essentially an aspect of Dickens's genial humour, is typical of the Romantics' and the Victorians' suspicion of this mode, expressed in their theoretical writing about it. It was a suspicion which Dickens himself came to share, and we find the strange spectacle of the novelist actually apologising for one of his greatest imaginative gifts, as an 'infirmity'; it is, he claims in a letter to Lytton of 1865 which is quoted by Forster, his 'infirmity to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally. Also, I have such an inexpressible enjoyment of what I see in a droll light, that I dare say I pet it as if it were a spoilt child'.⁵⁷

Dickens's career as a whole shows the control, and partial suppression, of the vividly grotesque elements of the early books, as he becomes absorbed by a vision of society which cries out for satirical treatment. After 1850, humour becomes a moral and satirical agency, rather than a way of experimenting with linguistic extravagance, or of exploring powerfully subversive and irrational aspects of the human personality. The major grotesques of the later books become absorbed into the moral vision as a whole, so that Mr Bounderby is seen as a product of social conditions; but of what is Quilp a product? The grotesques of the early books are autonomous

⁵⁷ The Life of Dickens, Book 9, Ch.1, p.721.

creations, who, by their linguistic versatility and power of personality, threaten to take over the book itself, a tendency which, in the second half of his career, Dickens strove to check.

Other commentators viewed the grotesque uneasily, if not with active hostility. Scott, in his discussion of Hoffmann, saw the German writer as the victim of an ill-regulated imagination, overpowered by his terrible and monstrously grotesque conceptions in which there is 'nothing to satisfy the understanding or inform the judgement';⁵⁸ the grotesque of The Sand-Man is, to Scott, completely senseless, and the story only shows that its author needed a doctor. Scott himself had, with the brilliant exception of 'Wandering Willie's Tale', eliminated the grotesque from his Scottish novels; but it was particularly in Scotland that the grotesque mode enjoyed a vigorous life in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It had been a staple humorous ingredient in the novels of Smollett, who had glimpsed, in Humphry Clinker, if only briefly, how it could be used as a medium through which part of the action of the novel could be seen; Burns's 'Tam O'Shanter' employs the grotesque as its controlling mode; the satirical flyting of Blackwood's Magazine, Galt's novel The Entail, and Hogg's Confessions of a Justified Sinner

⁵⁸ 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition; and particularly on the Works of Ernest Theodore William Hoffmann' (1827), Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction, edited by Ioan Williams (1968), p. 335.

are grotesque works of the 1820s; and, most substantially of all, in its blending of social criticism with Scottish and Richterian grotesque, Sartor Resartus represents the continuing vigour of this disturbing mode (Social criticism and the macabre grotesque are blended in Hood's extraordinary poem 'Miss Kilmansegg and her Precious Leg'). But, in the case of Carlyle's work, it is not the terrible grotesque of Richter which is imitated, but the genial grotesque which is most often taken up; and in his discussions of Richter, Carlyle omits to mention the kinds of satanic, or terrible, grotesque elements in his writing which are discussed in Wolfgang Kayser's book on the grotesque.⁵⁹ We noted how Carlyle objected to the elements of drollery in Burns, which showed his tendency towards caricature, much in the same way that Coleridge regulated the grotesque to the mechanical or fanciful part of the creative activity, along with wit and drollery, and distinct from true humour; and Carlyle sentimentalised Richter by ignoring the harshly grotesque in his work, much as Coleridge and Lamb played down Hogarth's harshly satirical dimension. Thackeray, too, in his discussion of Cruickshank, displayed the suspicion of the grotesque common to writers of the period, arguing that the grotesque was unacceptable on its own, but could be accepted

⁵⁹ Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Literature (1957, translated by Ulrich Weisstein, Bloomington, 1963), pp.54-6 and 64-8.

if it was mixed with some other quality; thus Cruickshank's work shows a 'proper admixture of the grotesque, the wonderful, and the graceful',⁶⁰ and grotesque ugliness is redeemed by beauty. For Ruskin, too, the grotesque was acceptable on a limited basis; he distinguished between what he called the Noble Grotesque, such as that of Dante and Spenser, which represents a balance of imagination, emotion, and intellect and which suggests an awareness of beauty, as it imparts sublimity to trivial objects as part of a symbolic design, and the Ignoble Grotesque, which shows deformity merely for its own sake, thus exposing the malicious and evil moral nature of the artist's mind;⁶¹ in terms of this analysis, Quilp would presumably represent Dickens's warped sensibility.

The grotesque mode was another challenge to the predominantly moral, genial, and reconciling humour of the early nineteenth century; and the challenge was met by absorbing the grotesque into that predominant tradition by making it the vehicle of genial humour, by 'redeeming' it through fusion with the beautiful, and by infusing it with a noble moral content. And the greatest example of the Noble

⁶⁰ 'George Cruickshank', Works, vol.23, p.402.

⁶¹ 'Grotesque Renaissance', The Stones of Venice, vol.3 (1853), Library Edition, edited by E.T.Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol.11 (1904), pp.179-89; 'Of the True Ideal: - Thirdly, Grotesque', Modern Painters, vol.3 (1856), Library Edition, vol.5 (1904), pp. 130-48.

Grotesque in the period is Sartor Resartus, in which the grotesque serves to embody the moral ideal of Man's ultimate redemption in Richterian genial 'sportfulness', rather than in the terrible grotesque of Richter's writing, or the grotesque of Hoffmann's terrifying The Sand-Man. Another main humorous challenge to the predominant tradition, the ironic mode, appears, too, in Carlyle's work; but it is the reconciling irony of Richter, rather than the Romantic irony of Byron, or Thackeray's subversive ironic perspectives which lead to our sinful selves. Sartor Resartus is the last great work of the moral humorous imagination in the nineteenth century, for between the time it was published and the middle of the century, the greatest humorists of the period, Thackeray and Dickens, explored, through subversive irony and often ignobly grotesque transformations of reality, alternative modes of humour which undermined the genial and moral humorous tradition itself.

CHAPTER FIVE. HUMOUR AND THE REDEMPTION OF MAN:

SARTOR RESARTUS

1

The warning of the threat to Man's essentially spiritual and imaginative nature - to his capacity for wonder and worship, by the growing power of mechanistic social forces, is a main theme of Carlyle's social writings of the 1830s, and its most profound and extended expression is to be found in Sartor Resartus. The message is conveyed through the symbolism of clothes; just as clothing conceals a spiritual creature, so the coverings of outworn, restrictive, and thwarting social institutions obstruct the development of Man's spiritual progress. Nature, too, is seen in terms of clothing, as the living garment of God, through which God reveals himself, as he does through Man's spiritual affirmations. This general exposition of the relationships of Man to his society and to the Deity is underpinned by the account of the symbolic life of the clothes-philosopher himself, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, who journeys through despair, denial of God, and the annihilation of the self, to affirmations of the Oneness of Nature and the Brotherhood of Man, which reach an ecstatically mystical climax in the chapter called 'Natural Supernaturalism', in which the spiritual reality of Man is seen on the grandest scale:

'Sweep away the Illusion of Time...Then sawest thou that this fair Universe...is in very deed the star-doomed City of God; that through every star, through every grass-blade, and most through every Living Soul, the glory of a present God still beams. But Nature, which is the Time-vesture of God, and reveals Him to the wise, hides Him from the foolish....

....like some wild-flaming, world-thundering train of Heaven's Artillery, does this mysterious MANKIND thunder and flame, in long-drawn, quick-succeeding grandeur, through the unknown Deep. Thus, like a God-created, fire-breathing Spirit-host, we emerge from the Inane; haste stormfully across the astonished Earth; then plunge again into the Inane. Earth's mountains are levelled, and her seas filled up, in our passage: can the Earth, which is but dead and a vision, resist Spirits which have reality and are alive? On the hardest adamant some foot-print of us is stamped-in; the last Rear of the host will read traces of the earliest Van. But whence? - O Heaven, wither? Sense knows not; Faith knows not; only that it is through Mystery to Mystery, from God and to God.' 1

The great radical question of Sartor Resartus is: what social forms can best express the godlike within us? Yet, at the same time, it is a great comic work, using humour to illuminate the themes of its analysis. Carlyle presents a vision of Man of great force and power; he is seen, in a series of ironic and dynamic juxtapositions, as both spiritual and material, godlike on the one hand and like the animals on the other, and as possessing both finite and great spiritual possibilities; and from these essentially grotesque

¹ Sartor Resartus (1834), Works, vol.1, Book 3, Ch.8, pp.210-12. All further references to Sartor Resartus are incorporated into the text.

comparisons and oppositions comes a humorous sympathy for Mankind's predicament which originates largely from Carlyle's reading of Richter and which forms, in the scope and grandeur of its sweep, the climax of the tradition of the humour of moral sympathy which began with the creation of amiable foibles in the eighteenth century. All the elements of this work: the hoax framework, the ironical juxtapositions, the grotesque comparisons: tend towards their ultimate annihilation by the Infinite, seen as the possibility of Man's spiritual rebirth and the finding of appropriate social forms through which to express his revitalised spiritual nature. The humour of the work is not only the humour of moral sympathy, but of social optimism and metaphysical affirmation, at once and together.

2

The adjectives which Eliot applied to the humour of Richter, 'tiresome' and 'laborious',² can also be applied to Carlyle's two earliest humorous pieces, the short story Cruthers and Jonson, written in 1822, and the fragment 'Illudo Chartis', written in 1826, both of which contain elements which were later incorporated into Sartor Resartus, but neither of which gives any encouragement to the view that

² 'German Wit: Heinrich Heine' (1856), Essays of George Eliot, edited by Thomas Pinney (1963), p.221.

Carlyle might write a great humorous work in the future. Cruthers and Jonson is an account of two school-friends who vow to be faithful to each other in times of trouble in later life. The story follows the career of Jonson, who drifts into joining the Jacobite cause in 1745, and is sentenced to death at Carlisle, where he is visited by Cruthers. He is, however, reprieved, and sent into exile; he goes to Jamaica, marries a rich planter's daughter, and returns home; on his death he is mourned by Cruthers. The humour of the story is crude and sporadic, the characterisation is lumbering and clumsy, and the attempts at bathos are laboured. The schoolmaster, the Dominie Scroggs, is a foreshadowing of a favourite physical type of Carlyle's; he is 'gaunt and sallow-visaged',³ leading on to the Corrys of 'Illudo Chartis' who are 'crane-necked, lank, purse-mouthed and fair-complexioned: from father to son, all walked with a stoop, all splayed out their feet at a given angle, and all spoke with the same Northumbrian burr',⁴ and, finally, to the figure of Heuschrecke of Sartor Resartus, whose machine-like characteristics illustrate the mechanical nature of his plan for getting rid of paupers.

³ Cruthers and Jonson (1822), Works, vol. 30 (Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, vol. 5), p. 170.

⁴ 'Illudo Chartis' (1826), ' "Illudo Chartis": an Initial Study in Carlyle's Mode of Composition', Marjorie P. King, The Modern Language Review, vol. 49 (1954), pp. 165-6.

Bathos, a device which Carlyle uses to great effect in Sartor Resartus, is laboured in Cruthers and Jonson, at the point, for example, when the friends' vow of eternal friendship is not ratified by some appropriately majestic sign, such as a thunder-clap, but by the appearance of a goose, intent on its own humble business:

the flapping, staggering, hovering half-flight of an old and care-worn goose, busily engaged in hatching nine addle eggs by the side of a neighbouring brook, and just then issuing forth with much croaking, and hissing, and blustering - less, I fear, to solemnise their engagement, than to seek her evening ration, of which, at that particular date, she felt a strong and very urgent need. ⁵

The most extended comic scenes in the story are the battle scenes. In the account of the battle of Prestonpans, the rout of the Royalist forces is epitomised in the description of the hasty retreat of the Ecclefechan barber who, like Scroggs and the Corrys, is 'a long-necked, purse-mouthed, tall, thin lath of a man', who follows his commanding officer in his flight from the field, as Carlyle heavily observes, 'to get orders, I suppose, throwing down his gun that he might go the faster'.⁶ In the account of the attempt of the Jacobites to defend Carlisle castle after the retreat from Derby, the comic aspect of the unpredictability of machinery

⁵ Works, vol. 30, p. 175.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 180-1.

is stressed (an idea which will also be used more successfully in Sartor Resartus), when one rusty cannon explodes, one falls into the moat, and another covers its firers in smoke.

In the very brief fragment 'Illudo Chartis', which describes the early life of Stephen Corry, the son of a Scottish stonemason, the humour is as laboured as it is in Cruthers and Jonson. Carlyle's eye for the absurd mainly concerns Stephen's father, whose incompetence as a stonemason forces him to become a quarryman; and since his wife, a 'virago' with 'brawny arms', refuses to move to where his work is, he has to walk to work and back every day, so that during his thirty years at the quarry, he must have 'footed' a distance (solely to fulfil the whim of his wife) considerably greater than four times the whole circumference of the Globe itself!'⁷

3

In the presentation, in Sartor Resartus, of serious matter by means of stylistic buffoonery, by using grotesque juxtapositions, and by constantly modulating between the ludicrous and the exalted, Carlyle's closest affinities are with the humorous methods of Richter, as they are described in his three essays on Jean Paul. But there are two other humorous writers who contributed to the creation of Sartor Resartus: Swift and Sterne. The Swiftian

⁷ 'Illudo Chartis', loc. cit., p. 165.

elements, in which Carlyle comes nearest to a savage satire which denies an outcome of hopeful reconciliation, occur in two places in the work. First comes the ferocious satire on the logical end of the Malthusian horror of population, a pauper-hunt, suggested to Teufelsdröckh by Heuschrecke's tract 'The Institute for the Repression of Population'. In a manner recalling the casual air of the persona of Swift's 'Modest Proposal', Teufelsdröckh comments that, in the face of the menace of growing population, it might be a good idea to organise a pauper hunt, in which "some three days annually might suffice to shoot all the able-bodied Paupers that had accumulated within the year" (Book 3, Ch. 4, p. 183). The second, even more apocalyptic, section is a vision of the future, divided between the forces of Drudgism and Dandyism. The section begins light-heartedly, when Carlyle comments on the dandies' devotion to clothes, and compares their practices to those of a religious sect, with its own Temples (their Clubs) and Sacred Books (the fashionable novels, which send Teufelsdröckh to sleep). But the tone becomes more savage in its description of the other 'sect', that of the Irish poor-slaves; and there is a climax of terrifying power as Carlyle describes the whirlpools caused by each sect coming closer and closer together (Book 3, Ch. 10, pp. 220-8).

But these two sections, powerful as they are, tend to break off from the work, forming self-contained units. Their ferocious tone contrasts with the predominantly genial, hopeful, and yearning tone of the work as a whole; they are examples of the terrible, satanic, grotesque, not the genial grotesque, a mode which is imparted partly through the more important and pervasive influence of Sterne, whom Carlyle ranked with Cervantes as a master of pathos. Tristram Shandy and Sartor Resartus have a general method of organisation in common; just as in Sartor Resartus there is presented the figure of the editor who is wrestling with intractable material, so in Tristram Shandy the narrator, too, is having difficulty with his material, in his case the material of his own life-story. Just as there is a contrast, too, in Carlyle's work, between a commonsensical, sceptical editor and a mystical philosopher, so in Sterne's book there is a contrast between the unimaginative and logical system of Walter Shandy and the illogical and intuitive view of Toby. But it is the spirit of Sterne which Carlyle sought to emulate in his work. That spirit of universal benevolence which expressed a feeling of love for all creation was shared by Richter, whose influence is the most pervasive in Sartor Resartus.

In the general sense in which Carlyle describes them, the works of Richter were the models for Sartor

Resartus itself; according to Carlyle, Richter's works are wild, erratic, and digressive, as is Sartor Resartus; and 'Every work, (of Richter) be it fiction or serious treatise, is embaled in some fantastic wrappage, some mad narrative accounting for its appearance, and connecting it with the author, who generally becomes a person in the drama himself, before all is over'.⁸

Although Carlyle does not introduce himself in his own person in Sartor Resartus (although Richter briefly appears, to cause Teufelsdröckh's enormous laugh), Carlyle's work is indeed 'embaled' in the 'fantastic wrappage' of the editorial apparatus, and a 'mad narrative' accounts for the appearance of the hero's autobiography in the form of several bits of paper in six paper bags, which the editor struggles to put into order as he struggles with the clothes-philosophy itself. In the third, and longest, essay on Richter, there is a specific seed of Sartor Resartus in Carlyle's account of Richter's 'clothes-martyrdom', in which, as a young man, he appeared in public wearing an open-necked shirt to the horror of the inhabitants of Leipzig, an episode which, according to Carlyle, demonstrated his hero's independence of behaviour and his 'buoyant, elastic humour of spirit'.⁹ Teufelsdröckh, like Richter, grew up in poverty; and his humour, like Richter's

⁸ 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1827), Works, vol. 26, p. 12.

⁹ 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter Again' (1830), Works, vol. 27, pp. 124-7.

resembles sunshine: 'Nevertheless in an atmosphere of Poverty and manifold Chagrin, the Humour of that young Soul, what character is in him, first decisively reveals itself; and, like strong sunshine in weeping skies, gives out variety of colours, some of which are prismatic'(Book 2, Ch. 3, p. 87).

There are other Richterian echoes in the text of Sartor Resartus; at one point, the editor remarks that Teufelsdröckh's feeling for the ludicrous may proceed from love, as did the humour of Richter himself: 'Our Professor, whether he have Humour himself or not, manifests a certain feeling of the Ludicrous, a sly observance of it, which, could emotion of any kind be confidently predicated of so still a man, we might call a real love'(Book 1, Ch. 7, p. 38); and Teufelsdröckh defines the function of the philosopher in terms which recall Richter's humorous stance: '"The Philosopher is he to whom the Highest has descended, and the Lowest has mounted up; who is the equal and kindly brother of all"'(Book 1, Ch. 10, p. 53).

This feeling of loving affinity with the whole of mankind (which is seen elsewhere as bestial and ignoble), is revealed by Teufelsdröckh at the climactic point of his spiritual development, when he is emerging from his dark despairing void of unbelief, and when

'Man, with his so mad wants and so mean
 Endeavours, had become the dearer to me;
 and even for his sufferings and his sins,
 I now first named him Brother...

'With other eyes, too, could I now look
 upon my fellow man: with an infinite Love,
 an infinite Pity. Poor, wandering, wayward
 man! Art thou not tried, and beaten with
 stripes, even as I am? Ever, whether thou
 bear the royal mantle or the beggar's
 gabardine, art thou not so weary, so heavy-
 laden; and thy Bed of Rest is but a Grave.
 O my Brother, my Brother, why cannot I
 shelter thee in my bosom, and wipe away
 all tears from thy eyes! - Truly, the din
 of many-voiced Life, which, in this solitude,
 with the mind's organ, I could hear, was no
 longer a maddening discord, but a melting
 one; like inarticulate cries, and sobbings
 of a dumb creature, which in the ear of
 Heaven are prayers.' (Book 2, Ch.9, pp.150-1)

4

It is upon Richterian foundations of a sportful
 and sympathetic humorous sensibility that Carlyle
 builds the structure of Sartor Resartus, a structure
 which reflects in various ways the underlying
 devices of grotesque and ironical juxtapositions.
 In the presentation of the relationship between the
 editor and his material, that of the life and
 opinions of Teufelsdröckh, the high-flown utterances
 of the clothes-philosopher, couched in the language
 of German mysticism, are frequently deflated by the
 empirical and sceptical questionings of the editor.
 In the presentation of the substance of Teufelsdröckh's
 vision itself, there is a continual dualism in which
 the exalted vision of Man as a spiritual being is
 juxtaposed with a vision of Man as a material being,

as animal-like, and as the absurd victim of his own deadly machinery; and whereas 'what is above us', the potential sublimity of Man, is seen in ecstatic and mystical terms, the bestial and mechanistic elements of Man, 'what is below us', are frequently seen in comic terms. And in the imagery of the work, too, Man's greatness and limitations are also suggested.

Over the first appearance of Sartor Resartus in the pages of Fraser's Magazine hovered the suspicion that the whole extraordinary production was a hoax, on a bigger scale than had been the 'Chaldee Manuscript' which had launched its rival in 1817. In Sartor Resartus, Carlyle had indeed carried on the hoax tradition of Blackwood's; neither Teufelsdröckh nor his work on clothes-philosophy existed, and Carlyle added to the effect by inventing an equally imaginary editor, whose task it was to present the life and works of the philosopher to the public. To compound the joke, the editor himself wonders whether Teufelsdröckh's autobiography is a hoax, musing that the writer might be 'laughing in his sleeve at these Autobiographical times of ours' (Book 2, Ch. 2, p. 75), as there grows in his mind the suspicion that 'these Autobiographical Documents are partly a mystification.' (Book 2, Ch. 10, p. 161). But the careful building up of the character of the editor has an important strategical purpose; since his bemusement reflects

that of the reader, he is the reader's route into the difficulties of the German's thought and style, and, ultimately, into the acceptance of his moral position. In his role as the bridge between the reader and the main material, the editor also reflects the conservative and sceptical attitude of the original subscribers to the Tory Fraser's. Though the editor affirms that he is prepared to do his professional best with the material he has, he gives warning that he does not subscribe to the wild radicalism of many of Teufelsdröckh's pronouncements; he opposes the 'Current of Innovation' which he sees supported in the philosopher's views, since he is 'animated with a true though perhaps a feeble attachment to the Institutions of our Ancestors' (Book 1, Ch. 2, p. 9), and he has this comment to make about Teufelsdröckh's extraordinary views on the subject of the ballot-box: 'It is our painful duty to announce, or repeat, that, looking into this man, we discern a deep, silent, slow-burning, inextinguishable Radicalism, such as fills us with shuddering admiration' (Book 3, Ch. 7, p. 199).

Not only does the editor dissociate himself from the political radicalism of Teufelsdröckh's pronouncements, but he is also unable to understand or appreciate much of the mystical side of the philosopher's writings; after quoting Teufelsdröckh's ecstatically mystical description of the old-clothes shops of Monmouth Street, the editor dryly comments that his

only experience in this area has been the predations of the 'brood of money-changers' who 'importune the worshipper with merely secular proposals' (Book 3, Ch.6, p.193). A similar bathos often serves to puncture Teufelsdröckh's high-flown meditations; and a main ironic device used in the work is the contrast between the empirical scepticism of the editor (and the reader himself, who can have the satisfaction of seeing his own annoyance being shared), and the mystical enthusiasm of Teufelsdröckh himself, a contrast by which the 'low' and the 'high' are brought together in a genially ironical way.

The editor sometimes directly comments on the predicament of the reader, who is depicted as wondering where all the rapt theorising is leading to, if, indeed, it has any destination at all. In an extended comic metaphor, the editor explains that he cannot construct a bridge which leads to the meaning of Teufelsdröckh's insights, but only a series of rafts, floating in the darkness, from which many of the readers who started the journey towards truth in good heart are pictured falling, or leaping into the 'Chaos-flood', and swimming for the shores (Book 3, Ch.9, p.214). Sometimes, Teufelsdröckh's insights are treated more slyly by the editor; when his mystical apprehensions of Reality, triggered off by the sight of a stupendous sunset, are rudely interrupted by the sudden appearance of the carriage containing his beloved Blumine and his successful

rival Towgood, the editor half-maliciously inserts, after the description of the incident, a previous observation by Teufelsdröckh on the epidemic of View-hunting, which was started, according to the philosopher, by the vogue for Werther (Book 2, Ch.6, p.124). On another occasion, after speaking in the most exalted terms about the Universe and Man himself as symbols of God, Teufelsdröckh is interrupted by the editor, who mischievously quotes another of the Professor's views, that 'man is by birth somewhat of an owl' (Book 3, Ch.3, p.175); this device, and others like it, is part of Carlyle's plan to present Man as both exalted and degraded, with affinities to God and to the beasts. Teufelsdröckh, the Seer of great truths, is often presented as a ridiculous figure; the mysterious, heavenly aura surrounding his origins (he was delivered at a cottage by a mysterious stranger and brought up by foster-parents) and his mysterious arrival in Weissnichtwo, with its suggestions of the godlike and the infinite, is somewhat dissipated when the wonder at his appearance dies away, and the infinite becomes the property of the finite when his appointment as Professor of Things in General is thought by 'the more cunning heads (to be) an expiring clutch at popularity, on the part of a Minister, whom domestic embarrassments, court intrigues, old age, and dropsy soon afterwards finally drove from the helm' (Book 1, Ch.3, p.14).

There is a similarly bathetic treatment of the love-affair of the Professor and Blumine, the disastrous conclusion of which is conveyed in an image of the sudden and rapid descent of an air-balloon containing the Professor, plunging down 'amid torn parachutes, sand-bags, and confused wreck' (Book 2, Ch.5, pp.117-8).

The humour of Sartor Resartus is, however, at its most profound when it brings together, in terms of Teufelsdröckh's vision, the finite in Man, 'what is below us', with the infinite, 'what is above us', to reveal the paradoxes of Man's complex nature. In the chapter called 'Pure Reason', the editor comments on Teufelsdröckh's strategy of both degrading and exalting Man - of moving, as it were, between the views of Swift on the one hand and Goethe on the other. The Professor pronounces: "'To the eye of vulgar Logic,..what is man? An omnivorous Biped that wears Breeches. To the eye of Pure Reason what is he? A Soul, a Spirit, and divine Apparition'" (Book 1, Ch.10, p.51), and the section in which Goethe's Earth-Spirit comments on Nature as 'the living Garment of God' ends with a reference to Swift's view of Man, which is immediately followed by its antithesis: "'Nevertheless there is something great in the moment when a man first strips himself of adventitious wrappings; and sees indeed that he is naked, and, as Swift has it, 'a forked straddling animal with bandy legs'; yet also a Spirit, and

unutterable Mystery of Mysteries" (Book 1, Ch.8, p.45).

The whole work is organised round sets of opposite and ironically juxtaposed notions about the nature of reality. Matter is juxtaposed with Spirit, Time with Eternity, and Appearance (Raiment) with Reality (Essence), and the main imagery-contrast is between Darkness and Light; and within the framework of these polarities, the dual nature of Man himself is unfolded: he is animal and spirit, beast-like and god-like, devilish and angelic, finite and infinite. Man is treated by Teufelsdröckh, the editor points out, with a mixture of love and sardonic humour, according as whether he is being exalted or exposed; so that in the presentation by Teufelsdröckh, 'there is always the strangest Dualism: light dancing, with guitar-music, will be going on in the fore-court, while by fits from within comes the faint whimpering of woe and wail' (Book 2, Ch.9, p.149), and the editor further explains that the Professor's 'Transcendentalism', by which Man is exalted to the level of the angel, is accompanied by a 'Descendentalism', by which Man is degraded to the level of the beast. (Book 1, Ch.10, p.51)

Within the terms of the ironic framework which Carlyle sets up, Man is often seen as a comic figure in so far as he fails to attain his full spiritual greatness, in a humorous vision which ranges from

the genial to the ferocious and from the sardonic to the tender, while maintaining as the basis of its feeling a sympathy for the plight of Mankind. Man as a clothes-wearing animal is often seen in Descendental terms, in the pictures of suddenly naked grandees at an important ceremony and of the naked Duke of Windlestraw in a naked House of Lords, at which Teufelsdröckh characteristically does not know whether to laugh or weep (Book 1, Ch.9, pp.48-9); and a section on the ludicrously elaborate clothes of the past ends with the literal deflation of an unfortunate courtier:

Thus too, treating of those enormous habiliments, that were not only slashed and galooned, but artificially swollen-out on the broader parts of the body, by introduction of Bran, - our Professor fails not to comment on that luckless Courtier, who having seated himself on a chair with some projecting nail on it, and therefrom rising, to pay his devoir to the entrance of Majesty, instantaneously emitted several pecks of dry wheat-dust: and stood there diminished to a spindle, his galoons and slashes dangling sorrowful and flabby round him. (Book 1, Ch.7, p.38)

More sardonic is the vision of Man as an animal, in which Swift's 'animal' becomes a beast or insect. The absurdity of the 'Clothes thatch' worn by Man reminds Teufelsdröckh of the sight of Dutch cows wearing jackets as they graze in the meadows of Gouda during the Wet season; the logic-choppers and enemies of Wonder are like the geese that cackled round the Capitol; the worn-out clothes which symbolise dead church-ceremony have become hollow shrouds under which

beetles and spiders crawl; Man is unflatteringly compared to an owl and a donkey; the "Dog-madness" of Utilitarianism is seen as spreading, till "the whole World-kennel will be rabid" (Book 3, Ch.5, p.187); and Man is compared, in his limitations of understanding, to a minnow, to whom every cranny of his immediate surroundings is familiar, but who knows nothing of the vast cosmic forces which regulate his tiny part of the river.

If Man's animal-like aspects hinder his spiritual development, so does his role as the victim of the mechanical forces which he has himself created. In its broadest theoretical terms, the devotion of Man to the mechanistic processes of Science is seen as a threat to his feeling of Wonder; and mechanistic processes are seen at several levels of operation. The elections for Parliament are seen as futile, mechanistic attempts to solve by calculation what are essentially spiritual problems; Teufelsdröckh's education was merely a mechanical process of disgorging information; and in the depths of his spiritual despair, he sees a vision of the Universe "all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb" (Book 2, Ch.7, p.133).

As we noted when discussing Carlyle's early comic fiction, his favourite physical type is the individual

who possesses the characteristics of a machine, such as Scroggs in Cruthers and Jonson and Corry in 'Illudo Chartis'; but in the portrait of Heuschrecke in Sartor Resartus, Carlyle does not merely produce another mechanised individual, but makes the character the expression of a mechanistic ethos. Heuschrecke is the author of the tract 'Institute for the Repression of Population', and 'seemed one of those purse-mouthed, crane-necked, clean-brushed, pacific individuals', who, at every pause in Teufelsdröckh's harangue 'gurgled-out his pursy chuckle of a cough-laugh (for the machinery of laughter took some time to get in motion, and seemed crank and slack)' (Book 1, Ch.3, pp.19-20). Even laughter, 'the cipher-key, wherewith we decipher the whole man' has become, in the author of the Malthusian tract, the expression of a mechanistic ethos; this laughter contrasts with the genuine outburst of Teufelsdröckh at Richter's idea for a cast-metal king, which brings together the finite and the infinite, and which leads to a disquisition on laughter, both genuine and feigned:

Readers who have any tincture of Psychology know...that no man who has once heartily and wholly laughed can be altogether irreclaimably bad...Some men wear an everlasting barren simper; in the smile of other lies a cold glitter as of ice: the fewest are able to laugh, what can be called laughing, but only sniff and titter and snigger from the throat outwards; or at best, produce some whiffling husky cachinnation, as if they were laughing through wool: of none such comes good. The man who cannot laugh is not only fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils; but his whole life is already a treason and a stratagem. (Book 1, Ch.4, p.26)

The machinery of destruction is treated in a characteristically ironic way; as Teufelsdröckh, during his Cain-like and despairing wanderings in the Arctic, gazes into the immensity of the landscape illuminated by the midnight sun, glimpsing as he does so 'the Palace of the Eternal', his grandiose meditations are interrupted by a Russian smuggler, whom he can only get rid of by producing a pistol. This bathetic episode is followed by the philosopher's meditations on duels, in which the ludicrous spectacle of Man in the face of the Infinite causes the laughter of God himself:

'With respect to Duels, indeed, I have my own ideas. Few things, in this so surprising world, strike me with more surprise. Two little visual Spectra of men, hovering with insecure enough cohesion in the midst of the UNFATHOMABLE, and to dissolve therein, at any rate, very soon, - make pause at the distance of twelve paces asunder; whirl round; and, simultaneously by the cunningest mechanism, explode one another into Dissolution; and off-hand become Air, and Non-existent! Deuce on it (verdammt), the little spitfires! - Nay, I think with old Hugo von Trimberg: "God must needs laugh outright, could such a thing be, to see his wondrous Manikins here below"!...(Book 2, Ch.8, pp.144-5)

The horrors of mechanised war itself are seen as the futile waste of useful lives in a useless cause; and Teufelsdröckh suggests as a solution to the problem of war the idea that the heads of the two armies should blow pipe-smoke at each other until one of them gives in.

In his handling of the two central images of the work, those of rivers and seas on the one hand, and of light and fire on the other, Carlyle uses bathetic and ironic juxtapositions for humorous effect also. We noted how the editor humorously depicted, in a slyly genial way, the readers of Fraser's as falling off his rafts into the 'Chaos-flood' of the Professor's speculations, and how the image of water is used for the purposes of Swiftian satire, in the picture of the converging whirlpools of Dandyism and Drudgism coming ever closer together. But the familiar pattern emerges; by the side of these humorous uses of the image of water, Carlyle invests it with a serious meaning; the clothes-volume is described as 'a very Sea of Thought; neither calm nor clear, if you will; yet wherein the toughest pearl-diver may dive to his utmost depth, and return not only with sea-wreck but with true orients' (Book 1, Ch.2, p.6), and the flood of Platonic mysticism is compared to viewing 'a whole inward Sea of Light and Love' (Book 1, Ch.10, p.52). The image of water and that of light frequently combine in the work, most significantly perhaps in the quotation of the Earth-Spirit's speech from Faust about Nature as the Garment of God:

"In Being's floods, in Action's storm,
I walk and work, above, beneath,
Work and weave in endless motion!
Birth and Death,
An infinite ocean;
A seizing and giving,
The Fire of the Living:
'Tis thus at the roaring Loom of Time I ply,
And weave for God the Garment thou seest Him
by" (Book 1, Ch.8, p.43)

These two images, of water and fire, radiate out through Carlyle's work, bearing their multiple meanings; and of the two images, that of fire and light is the more important one.

The work opens with a great comic image, in which the whole range of scientific activity is depicted in terms of illumination from the rush-lights and sulphur-matches lit from the Torch of Science, which have laid open the whole of Man's life and environment, except for the nature of clothes; and the scientists appear again in the chapter on 'Pure Reason', more sardonically treated; they "often, as illuminated Sceptics, walk abroad into peaceable society, in full daylight, with rattle and lantern, and insist on guiding you and guarding you therewith, though the Sun is shining". (Book 1, Ch. 10, p. 54).

But Carlyle does not merely use the image of light to convey the purblind nature of the scientist; the image occupies a central place in the didactic scheme of the whole work. On the personal level, the image is central; Teufelsdröckh's conversion-experience, which takes place when he is walking along the Rue Saint-Thomas de l'Enfer, is likened to a stream of fire which rushes over his soul, and is described as a "Baphometric Fire-baptism" (Book 2, Ch. 7, pp. 134-5). In the wider context of the social criticism of Sartor Resartus, the image of fire is

central too; as he rides through the Black Forest, Teufelsdröckh realises that the glowing fire which he sees is not a detached, independent spark, but is indissolubly joined to the whole Universe:"it is a little ganglion, or nervous centre, in the great vital system of Immensity"(Book 1, Ch.11, p.56). On an equally immense scale, the new society can only come about through the burning of the rubbish of the old, a fire-destruction and creation which will be Phoenix-like in character, where "In that Fire-whirlwind, Creation and Destruction proceed together"(Book 3, Ch.7, p.195). Both the little and the great in Man, between which the humour of Sartor Resartus has moved, and which it has illuminated, will be annihilated finally by the Infinite, that future state in which Man will be spiritually reborn; and the annihilation by the Infinite in Carlyle's vision of the future as the climax of his vision of Mankind is also the final movement of Richterian humour, and the end of Carlyle's attempt to use it as a fundamental method of presenting his vision. The optimism which sustained the genial grotesque of Sartor Resartus gradually ebbed away in Carlyle's social writing, as he became more and more despairing, relying on simpler and more drastic solutions for the country's social ills; and the humour which sustained that optimism itself turned sour, degenerating into hysterical denunciation or flyting malice, invoking the reverse of love and sympathy in its feeling for

the bizarre:

"Ah, your tea is too cold, Mr Coleridge!"
 mourned the good Mrs Gilman once, in her
 kind, reverential and yet protective manner,
 handing him a very tolerable though belated
 cup. - "It's better than I deserve!" snuffled
 he, in a low hoarse murmur, partly curteous,
 chiefly pious, the tone of which still abides
 with me: "It's better than I deserve!" 10

¹⁰ The Life of John Sterling (1851), Works, vol. 11,
 Part 1, Ch. 8, p. 58.

CHAPTER SIX.THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IRONICAL VISION:HUMOUR IN THACKERAY 1837 - 1848

1

Thackeray's general view of the social world was that it was a melancholy comedy, the appropriate reaction to which should be a mixture of laughter and tears. The first mature expression of this vision is Vanity Fair, a novel which is the result of ten years' experimenting with modes of humour which would convey fully the ambivalence of the comic spectacle of life, and which would implicate the reader in the selfishness and deceptions which pervade society. The subject-matter which was to occupy Thackeray for years makes an immediate appearance in his writings: the helplessness of the shabby-genteel as they struggle to put up a good appearance; the efforts of the tribes of impecunious swindlers living off their wits and on nothing a year, and their pathetic dupes; the domestic hell of the frustrated and the deluded; and the predominant emotional conditions of envy, hatred, snobbery, selfishness, and self-deception to which such people and such worlds give rise. Thackeray also knew at the beginning that he was a humorous writer, and the question which he tried to solve was: what are the humorous methods by which such a vision of the social comedy can be presented?

Austen, too, had seen the social world in comic terms, but there are two important ways in which Thackeray's vision differs from hers. Thackeray's social world is far more vicious and predatory than Austen's; and in Thackeray's novels we are not permitted that objective, distanced, and judicial view which Austen shares with the reader. The reader of Thackeray's novels is, more and more as the career develops, associated with the distasteful actions and attitudes of the characters; Thackeray's humorous medium forces us to find within ourselves the same ambivalence of attitude and mixture of motives as are possessed by the denizens of his murky world. Austen's world is a closed one, with all tensions resolved at the end in a marriage; Thackeray, despite pious affirmations, presents a disturbing world in which the tensions are not resolved by the traditional devices of comedy, or by the presence of the reassuring companionship of the author. In this sense, Thackeray's humorous thrust is more like Byron's, with its unresolved conflicts and paradoxical assertions; but while we are permitted to simply enjoy Byron's outrageous juxtapositions on an uninvolved and intellectual level, Thackeray insists that the spectacle we are watching is one in which we, too, have a part to play.

Thackeray can be seen, from the start of his career, to be striving to achieve a humorous tone which should not only bind the characters together

and blend them with the action of the story: a tone which would be a medium in which character and events are sunk and by which both are permeated: but which should also so saturate the narrative that the reader himself is implicated in the (often necessary) hypocrisies of the social life by means of a constantly modulating irony by comparison with which Byron's irony seems stiff and crude. Such a tone, which must, too, allow for the confessions of the author himself, as a participant in the social comedy, to the weaknesses he describes, must check any tendencies to running to extremes; the overdramatic and the sensational event, and the grotesquely conceived character, must all be avoided as character and events are controlled by the play of ironic intelligence; and it was by checking such extremes, into which he fell in the early part of his career, that Thackeray could mould his mature vision.

There are several reasons why Thackeray fails to achieve an attitude of poised complexity to his material in the first ten years of his writing life. Sometimes, under the pressure of his fear and anger at the selfishness he saw around him, he simply allowed himself to depict character as caricature and event as farce, resulting in the grotesque extremes of the two early stories The Fatal Boots and Cox's Diary. Here, we simply recoil from the snobbery of attacks on those who try to rise above their station; in these stories, Thackeray displays

all the crudeness of technique and mindless viciousness of attitude which dominate so much of the low humour of the period. Sometimes, a story begins well, but there is a breakdown into caricature and farce towards the end: this happens in the promising A Shabby Genteel Story; and in Yellowplush's account of the doings of the great, the carefully built-up idiom of Yellowplushese by which the events are narrated is gradually invaded by Thackeray's irrepressible outrage at the horrors described. There is an advance in solving the problems of consistency of tone in The Great Hoggarty Diamond, in which the opportunities for caricaturing the vulgar and the villainous are ignored in favour of a more compassionate view of human failing, which was to be an important element in the later, more mature, tone; but there is not yet that fullness of interpenetration of narrator, characters, and events which is present in the late work. But in the account of the doings of the Snobs, compassion is a major element in the tone, and so is self-implication in the vice of snobbery, which is immediate and sustained. The accounts of the Fat Contributor mark another advance; the persona sees himself ironically, and has begun to develop the sort of awareness of how others see him which the narrator of Vanity Fair has; but Fitzboodle's attempts to recount the shocking marital disasters of Dennis Haggarty in the ambitious story Dennis

Haggarty's Wife once again bring about the kind of breakdown in which the humorous tone becomes an inadequate and inappropriate means of rendering the horrors described. The advances of Thackeray's career moved slowly and unevenly; but after ten years of experimenting, he found the right tone.

There was not, in the contemporary career of Dickens, a comparable process of experiment and adjustment, of slow advance and slipping back, as the capacity of the humorous vision for recording reality was tested and tested again. At the very outset of his career, Dickens showed that, for him, the humorous sensibility was a medium by which the whole of reality could be absorbed and transformed; anger and fear, far from threatening a delicate balance held precariously between extremes, could be transformed into a delighted celebration of the existence of a Quilp or a Squeers. Dickens revelled in the subversive possibilities of his own grotesque imaginings, feeling, during the first half of his career, no desire to check or restrain such a playful and anarchic sensibility. Thackeray's early career showed as much what humour was incapable of doing for him as what its possibilities were, and it could not illuminate the monstrous and the extreme; the odious Earl of Crabs and the despicable Jemima Gam only overwhelm the narrow but precise range of its possibilities. But the contempt which such characters generated in the mind of their creator was

gradually controlled, and a balance was struck between cynical awareness and compassionate understanding, a balance which is ill represented in the pious simplicities and evasions of Thackeray's theoretical views of the social purposes of humour.

In its habits of hesitating, of withholding the hand that wields the knife under the recognition that the quality about to be exposed is in the attacker himself, and of even seeming to contradict itself, Thackeray's mature humorous sensibility can suggest the complexity of moral judgement by retreating, more delicately than did Byron's ironical methods, into a regressive series of ironic stances. In such a movement, ambivalence accumulates; the tone is poised between that of the 'weekday preacher' of Thackeray's theory of humour, giving advice, and that of the entertainer, providing comedy, with the suggestion that neither is an adequate response to the social comedy, and that their combination is equally unsatisfactory; the comedy, too, is ambivalent, since it can be either the comedy of errors, which suggests a sympathy for the victims, or the comedy of conscious self-deception, generating a healthy dislike for hypocrisy; but hypocrisy can itself be double-edged, inviting condemnation for its effects on the moral life, but also the recognition that it involves resources of social courage which produce reluctant admiration. It is a characteristic of Thackeray's mature humorous sensibility that it can

manoeuvre the reader into assenting to positions which are later qualified or denied; as the victim of shifting assumptions, the reader feels uncomfortable and sometimes rather foolish. The humour of Scott, and of Carlyle in Sartor Resartus, directs the moral orientation of the reader; the humour of Thackeray disturbs it, not by a Dickensian indulgence in grotesque excesses by which wickedness is made to seem somehow acceptable, but by a control of ironic perspectives by which we are implicated in, and collaborate in, a dark vision of selfishness and self-interest.

2

The limitations and deficiencies of Stubbs's Calendar: or, The Fatal Boots (1839) and Cox's Diary (1840) are no doubt partly due to their monthly appearance in serial form in Cruikshank's Comic Almanac; under such cramped conditions, there was simply no room to expand into nuance of character and expressiveness of comment. Yet these two stories throw into stark relief major flaws of Thackeray's early humorous writing as a whole: the reliance on stock characters and crude farcical situations, to express contempt for and fear of (as in so much low humour of the period) those who threaten to rise from their social class, a conservative fear which is expressed by similar means in the novels of Hook, Hood's Tylney Hall (1834) and Warren's Ten Thousand

a-Year (1841). It was Thackeray's working his way through such attitudes, and creating more complex humorous techniques, which separated him gradually from such dubious literary company.

Bob Stubbs, the hero of The Fatal Boots, narrates his own history of humiliation and exposure, which proceeds from his own scoundrelism; while, in a crude contrast, he insists on his own innocence and excellence of character, he is a hypocrite whose professions are blatantly contradicted by his practice. Bob is the penniless son of shabby-genteel parents, and is motivated by a desire for gentility which he feels is his by right. His swindling activities at school are exposed, and he is flogged; and his attempts to obtain a pair of boots from a cobbler called Stiffelkind without paying for them are exposed too. He joins the militia and becomes engaged to a rich girl, Miss Crutty, but the wedding is called off since her uncle turns out to be Stiffelkind. Further attempts to marry for money are foiled; he eventually marries a woman whom he believes to be rich, but she turns out to be a swindler too, and already married. He is finally arrested for debt, but gets a job as a postman, meets his mother on a delivery, and the story ends with his sponging off her. The blatant use of absurd coincidence and broad farce, and the constant device of humiliating the hero (particularly unpleasant is a scene in which Bob is confronted by a vicious dog, which he kills),

link the story to the appalling novels of Hook; and while many of the themes of the story (the urge for gentility, the uses of swindling, and marrying for money) appear later among the material of Thackeray's greatest work, in The Fatal Boots he has not yet found an artistically satisfying way of treating them, and transforming them from their raw state.

The humour of Cox's Diary is similar to that of The Fatal Boots. Cox, a barber, acquires some money through his wife's uncle, and recounts his disastrous experiences in mixing in Society. His vulgarity at a party offends noble guests; his attempts to hunt end in his falling into mud from a tree in which he has become entangled; he falls through the trapdoor of the stage at a ballet performance; he is duped by a 'Baron' who turns out to be a circus performer; and, in the end, his money goes to the rightful heir and Cox returns to being a barber. Although Cox himself is not such an odious character as Stubbs (he is stupid rather than vicious, and his wife is behind the family urge to gentility), the humour is as crude as that of the earlier story, based on the same assumption that if tradesmen try to get above themselves, they deserve all they get, an assumption which is also behind Hook's novel Jack Brag (1837).

One of the stock comic butts of the period was the figure of the parvenu; the man, usually someone in trade, whose social elevation offered endless opportunities for class jokes, the psychological basis of which is a fear of the ways in which the 'wrong' kind of person can aspire to a gentility of which he is unworthy. Whereas Thackeray shares this attitude in The Fatal Boots and Cox's Diary, he also joined the attack on fashionable novels, giving expression to the joke that they were in fact written by footmen in the Yellowplush stories; no such ambivalence is noticeable in the dreadful novels of Hook, where the driving snobbery and hysteria, the basis of the humorous treatment, are clear. Hook's own progress up the social scale gives an additional venom to his fear that others may do the same; his snobbery is the snobbery of the parvenu himself. Hazlitt acutely observed that the popularity of novels such as Sayings and Doings was due to the need of people to feel intimately involved in the lives of the gentry, and to feel a dislike for lower orders such as tradesmen; such works merely illustrate their author's 'servility, egotism and upstart pretensions'.¹ Sayings and Doings is full of attacks on those whose lack of breeding betrays them on social occasions; and a whole novel, Jack Brag, is devoted to the exposure and humiliation of the hero, who, through his ruling passion of boasting, continually finds himself in awkward and embarrassing

¹ 'The Dandy School', The Examiner, Nov. 18 1827, The Complete Works, vol. 20, p. 144.

situations. When Jack, for example, is boasting to a stranger whom he met in an inn about his (imaginary) social connexions, and the illusion is rudely shattered by the groom's announcement that Jack's horses are hired, Hook comments: 'Of all the curs unhung, there is none so awfully contemptible as a drivelling braggart';² when Jack and his friends arrange to answer, for a joke, an advertisement from a husband-hunting widow who turns out to be Jack's mother, Hook remarks on the 'melancholy proceedings of our wretched little hero';³ and Jack is described generally as 'one of the regular cur tribe, who sneak back to the vulgar great upon the "cut and come again" principle',⁴ and placed, socially, in familiar terms:

There are a set of under-bred fellows in the world, who swagger and strut about, because by some accident, sometimes as little honourable or decent to themselves as may be, they have got hold of money, which they as little deserve as they had any right to expect - who fancy, because, from their very insignificance, they have shuffled, screwed, or pushed themselves into society to which they ought not to belong, they are to mount upon their money-bags into yet higher places; and who, exactly in proportion to their natural meanness and original insignificance, perk up their noses and toss their heads, to give them a consequence, which makes them insufferably odious to the people with whom they really do live, and incalculably ridiculous to those with whom they never can live, let them try as much as they may. 5

Jeering at widows and spinsters is another prominent aspect of Hook's humour. The frustrations

² Jack Brag (1837), vol. 1, Ch. 2, p. 26.

³ Ibid., vol. 1, Ch. 6, p. 90.

⁴ Ibid., vol. 2, Ch. 2, p. 169.

⁵ Ibid., vol. 2, Ch. 3, pp. 201-1.

of middle-aged spinsters were another favourite humorous target of the period, and Dickens's treatment of the humiliations of Rachel Wardle at the hands of the swindler Jingle connect him to this unpleasant element of the humour of the time. The figure of the husband-hunting widow, whom Mrs Trollope dissects over a whole, tedious novel, The Widow Barnaby (1839), appears in Jack Brag in the form of Jack's mother, whose advertisement in the paper for a husband is answered by her son and a gang of his friends, to whom she furiously reveals her son's real social origins.⁶ She later marries the younger, and even more vulgar, Jem Salmon, a shop-keeper who has only married her for her money; and she is humiliated by one of Jem's old flames, the actress Molly Hogg, before Jem finally leaves her in poverty and distress.

The compulsive exposure of the parvenu is done at even greater length in Samuel Warren's novel Ten Thousand a-Year, in which the story revolves around Tittlebat Titmouse, a shop assistant, who finds that he has inherited an estate in Yorkshire. When Titmouse is on the scene, the writing has a certain vitality, and the sociology of the figure of the 'gent' is an interesting feature of Warren's treatment; and we can feel some sympathy for the hero, since he becomes the victim of rogue lawyers. But Warren's

⁶ Ibid., vol.1, Ch.6, pp.82-90.

contempt for the hero's aspirations to the ranks of the upper classes is boundless, as is his awed worship of the noble owners of the estate who are being displaced by the claims of the hero. And even the kindly Hood included in his novel Tynley Hall the figure of Twigg, a retired ironmonger, who is a comic butt throughout, and who finally gets his deserts when his garden party is ruined by a beserk cow and his drunken son.

One of the few authors of the period who relishes the vulgarity of his upstart hero is Surtees, who presents Jorrocks in Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities (1834) and Handley Cross (1843) genially, as a ridiculous, but endearing, figure. He is certainly a comic butt: in Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities he falls off his horse into a cess-pool, loses his trousers while bathing, is nearly sick in the Channel, falls over on the dance floor, gets drunk at a dinner, and finally nearly drowns. But there is no venomous hatred and desire to humiliate behind such adventures, from which the hero emerges as robust and energetic as before. The broad geniality of Surtees's humour extends, too, in a sociological direction, as he observes the types of behaviour brought out in the social melting-pots of the hunting-field or the turf with a tolerant eye; as the City types meet for the Croydon hunt, the talk is about 'not where the hounds, but what the Consols, left off at; what the four per

cents, and not the four horses, were up to; what the condition of the money, not the horse, market';⁷ and, in the midst of the excitement of the hunt, professional interests insist on coming through: ' "You're not going down that bank, surely sir? Why, it's almost perpendicular! For God's sake, sir, take care - remember you are not insured" '...⁸

Much of the humour of the novel concerns, in a genial and not a vicious way, the confusions of social status of the society in which Mr Jorrocks moves; there is a conversation about the status of a 'gentleman' who turns out to be an hotel keeper, and Jorrocks attends a ball in France at which the guests are mainly shopkeepers, but he is under the impression that he is in high society. Surtees is interested in noting the habits of the new middle classes who live in the suburbs through which the hunt goes: 'every now and then a 'willla' appears, from which emerge footmen in jackets, and in yellow, red and green plush breeches, with no end of admiring housemaids, governesses, and nurses with children in their arms'.⁹

As a comic example of the Cockney's delight in aping a country gentleman, Surtees describes the

⁷ Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities (1834, Everyman Edition, 1928), Ch.2, p.27.

⁸ Ibid., Ch.1, p.3.

⁹ Ibid., Ch.2, p.32.

castellated house of Nosey Browne, with its battlements, guns, and huge front door, 'combining almost every absurdity a cockney imagination can be capable of';¹⁰ even more elaborate is the castle of Marmaduke Muleygrubs in Chapter 39 of Handley Cross, a novel in which Jorrocks finds himself involved in the affairs of a new spa town. The figure of the urban dandy is similarly ridiculed, but the portrait of Jemmy Green has none of Warren's vicious hatred of the 'gent' behind it; Jemmy had on

a woolly white hat, his usual pea-green coat, with a fine, false, four-frilled front to his shirt, embroidered, plaited, and puckered, like a lady's habit-shirt. Down the front were three or four different sorts of studs, and a butterfly brooch, made of various coloured glasses, sat in the centre. His cravat was of a yellow silk with a flowered border, confining gills sharp and pointed that looked up his nostrils; his double-breasted waistcoat was of red and yellow tartan with blue glass post-boy buttons; and his trousers, which were very wide and cut out over the foot of rusty-black chamois-leather opera-boots, were of a broad blue stripe upon a white ground. A curly, bushy, sandy-coloured wig protruded from the sides of his woolly white hat, and shaded a vacant countenance, which formed the frontispiece of a great chuckle head. Sky-blue gloves and a stout cane, with large tassels, completed the rigging of this borough dandy. Altogether he was as fine as any peacock, and as vain as the proudest. 11

Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities and Handley Cross are novels which extend the scope of the sociological novels pioneered by Galt; the scenes in which Surtees sets his stories are more varied than those of Galt's

¹⁰ Ibid., Ch.3, p.42.

¹¹ Ibid., Ch.7, p.111.

novels, which depict a rural, static society; yet the basic device of illuminating a social milieu through a comic character makes Surtees a novelist in the Galt tradition; and, in his sociological interests, Surtees leads on, in turn, to Sketches by Boz.

3

It was through parody, an art at which Thackeray always excelled, that his first opportunity to develop a humorous tone on an extended scale came, in 1837. The idea that fashionable novels are written by footmen allowed Thackeray to invent Mr Charles James Yellowplush, a footman of uncertain, though he believes, gentlemanly, origin, who gives an account, in his own fractured, genteel prose, of his experience in the service of the shabby-genteel and the predatory swindlers of upper class society. The language used by Yellowplush, besides revealing his own aspirations to gentility, gives Thackeray the opportunity to employ a sustained humorous tone through which the events of the narrative are related. In the servant's account of washing day at the house of Mr and Mrs Shum, a shabby-genteel couple who have as their lodger Mr Frederick Altamont, Yellowplush's master, Thackeray builds up, in the detailed observations of Yellowplush, an impression of the servant's character and the conditions of Shum's house, at the same time:

Before the house was a little garden, where the washin of the famly was all ways hanging. There was so many of 'em that it was obliged to be done by relays. There was six rails and a stocking on each, and four small goosbry bushes, always covered with some bit of linning or other. The hall was a regular puddle: wet dabs of dishclouts flapped in your face; soapy smoking bits of flannin went nigh to choke you; and while you were looking up to prevent hanging yourself with the ropes which were strung across and about, slap came the hedge of a pail against your shins, till one was like to be drove mad with hagony. The great slattnly doddling girls was always on the stairs, poking about with nasty flower-pots, a-cooking something, or sprawling in the window-seats with greasy curl-papers, reading greasy novls..¹²

Through carefully building up Yellowplush's point of view, Thackeray develops his picture of the shabby genteel context of the Shums' house, concentrating particularly on the social aspirations of the awful Mrs Shum, a vicious and violent woman whom Yellowplush crudely describes as 'puffin like a poppus' and 'as fat and as fierce as an old sow at feedin time'.¹³ Altamont eventually marries Mary, the pathetic and put-upon Shum daughter, but there is a mystery about the source of his income; at the end of the story it is revealed that, despite his genteel pretensions, Altamont earns his living by sweeping the crossings from the Bank to Cornhill. Here the carefully built up humorous tone, a linguistic experiment of some subtlety, collapses under the need for an exposure-device with which to make a denouement to the story;

¹² The Memoirs of Mr Charles J. Yellowplush (1838), Works, vol. 5, Miss Shum's Husband, Ch. 1, p. 7.

¹³ Ibid., Ch. 1, p. 8; Ch. 2, p. 15.

but up to this point, the consistency of the narrative viewpoint has been sustained, and, through its use, Thackeray has begun to build up some of his typical characters: the termagant mother-in-law, the put-upon daughter, and the husband crushed by the pressures of a society which worships appearance above all else.

In the two long and more ambitious stories about Algernon Deuceace, into whose service Yellowplush next enters, Dimond Cut Dimond and Mr Deuceace at Paris, Thackeray's control of the point of view falters and collapses as it gradually becomes apparent that the characters of Deuceace, his monstrous father the Earl of Crabs, and the two women between whom Algernon has to choose, become too powerfully terrible to be contained by the original narrative medium, which is gradually abandoned as the story moves towards a climax of crude and horrifying power. Deuceace, the impoverished youngest son of the Earl of Crabs, is the first in the long line of swindlers who live on their wits, by preying on others for money or by marrying it, who appear in Thackeray's novels. At the beginning of the Deuceace section, Thackeray continues to build up the character of Yellowplush, in which he is soon to lose interest, through such observations as the servants comment on his

master's

gambling activities: 'If he had been a common man, you'd have said he was no better than a swinler', and his remark that 'we like being insulted by noblemen'.¹⁴ In Dimond Cut Dimond, Deuceace is shown as a callous rogue, winning, in a gambling game, all the money of a dupe, Dawkins; and in Mr Deuceace at Paris, Thackeray develops two more character-types who were to interest him: the monstrous and amoral Earl of Crabs, who is more than a match for his son in villainy, and the cold Lady Griffin, motivated by hatred, who lives with her step-daughter, Matilda, in an atmosphere of mutual detestation. Deuceace's problem is that he must marry the woman to whom the money will come, but his plans are ruined by the fiendish calculations of Crabs and Lady Griffin, into whose net he is drawn. Lady Griffin provokes a duel between Deuceace and his rival in which Deuceace loses his left hand, and Crabs arranges his son's arrest for his English debts, marries Lady Griffin, and exults over his son, who has married Matilda but who will get no money since she married without her stepmother's consent. During the development of this story, Thackeray has gradually jettisoned the humorous medium of the narrative by which Yellowplush's character has been built up; and in the final scenes of the story, which are of the utmost emotional violence, the power of the revelations completely shatters the humorous framework in which the story was originally set. Beyond humorous treatment is the final glimpse by

¹⁴ Ibid., Dimond Cut Dimond, pp.27 and 47.

Yellowplush, now in the service of the Earl of Crabs, of the wretched Deuceace and his wife, as he drives past in Crabs's carriage:

DEUCEACE turned round. I see his face now - the face of a devvle of hell! Fust, he lookt towards the carridge, and pinte to it with his maimed arm; then he raised the other, and struck the woman by his side. She fell, screaming.
Poor thing! Poor thing! 15

There is a similar kind of breakdown, when the emotional content of the story cannot be contained by the humorous tone, in a later, more ambitious, short story, Dennis Haggarty's Wife, the last story of the three in the Men's Wives set (1843). The first story of this set, The Ravenswing, largely represents Thackeray going over old ground, and often reverting to the crudity of his earliest humorous writing. The humour of caricature and farce is represented in the treatment of the antics of the rivals for the hand of the fair Morgiana, Eglantine the barber and Woolsey the tailor (Woolsey unconvincingly switches from being a butt to being a figure of sympathy about halfway through the story); but in a meditation on the 'organised egotism' of Club life, where it is possible to die and not be missed by one's fellow members, Thackeray manages to transform his sense of outrage at the callousness of the world into the kind of poised ironic image which was to become an important element in his later mature humorous tone.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., Mr Deuceace at Paris, Ch. 10, p. 124.

¹⁶ The Ravenswing (1843), Works, vol. 5, Ch. 5, pp. 240-1.

In Dennis Haggarty's Wife there is a greater attempt at consistency, which is provided by the tight organisation of the story, and by the tone of the narrator, Fitzboodle, a man of the world, who relays the marital adventures of Haggarty. The tone of savage satire is set in the cutting opening paragraph of the story:

There was an odious Irishwoman who with her daughter used to frequent the 'Royal Hotel' at Leamington some years ago, and who went by the name of Mrs Major Gam. Gam had been a distinguished officer in His Majesty's service, whom nothing but death and his own amiable wife could overcome. The widow mourned her husband in the most becoming bombazeen she could muster, and had at least half an inch of lampblack round the immense visiting tickets which she left at the houses of the nobility and gentry her friends. 17

The story falls into three sections. The first covers the background of the wooing of Jemima Gam by the infatuated Haggarty, which is at first unsuccessful, but, three years later, is successful, as a newspaper announcement makes clear; in the second section, set a few years later, Fitzboodle meets Haggarty and goes to his squalid house, where he is told the story of the successful wooing of Jemima, successful because she was blind and disfigured by smallpox, facts unknown to Haggarty, who had met her again in a darkened room; and the final part of the story, told to Fitzboodle by Haggarty later, recounts how his wife has left him, and it is here that even the establishing savage

17 Dennis Haggarty's Wife (1843), *ibid.*, p. 332.

satirical tone which described the Gams becomes inadequate to contain the emotional distress of Haggarty's outburst at recalling his desertion by his wife. The story reveals how the transparently honest of the world, in the person of Haggarty, are the victims of the utterly selfish and hypocritical, the Gams, who remain throughout convinced of their self-righteousness. The ultimate failure of the story, however, lies in the problems presented by the character of Haggarty himself.

In so far as the story focuses on the Gams, the savage satirical tone is appropriate and consistent, if extremely pessimistic; the blatant ways in which the old lady tries to marry off her daughter, and the termagant character of the married Jemima herself, are dealt with successfully. But our first impression of Haggarty, as a figure of fun, whose ludicrous infatuation is fixed upon an obviously unworthy object, is too powerful to be completely superseded by the pathetic Haggarty as he sobs out his sorrow, epitomising what the narrator calls the 'humility' of a 'tender and simple heart';¹⁸ and at the end of the story there is too stark an overall opposition between the extremes of pure evil and pure goodness. Thackeray has pushed the story to extremes which the framework, like that of the final Yellowplush story, cannot contain; and a tone which could account for both the character of people like the Gams and of

¹⁸ Ibid., p.352.

people like Haggarty continued to elude him, not to be found until the triumph of Vanity Fair.

4

Two short novels of the early part of Thackeray's career, A Shabby Genteel Story (1840) and The Great Hoggarty Diamond (1841), show the gradual process of Thackeray's escape from early, crude, humorous modes, as he evolved a more mature and complex humorous manner; in these stories, a more compassionate sensibility can be seen to be emerging, in passages of reflection which anticipate Vanity Fair in tone and content.

A Shabby Genteel Story opens brilliantly, with an evocative description of the location of the story, the boarding house of Mr and Mrs Gann in out-of-season Margate. In the sordid, shabby-genteel context of Margate, the aspirations of Mrs Gann to gentility are doomed to frustration; and her husband, the victim of the collapse of his business, has become a heavy drinker. The 'hero' of the story is George Brandon, who is seen as the product of the destructive effects of the 'education of a gentleman';¹⁹ in the treatment of this scoundrel, Thackeray shows an awareness of the emotionally debilitating effects of the early environment by which Brandon's character was formed, thus importing into the character an element of compassionate understanding. The portrait

¹⁹ A Shabby Genteel Story (1840), Works, vol.18, Ch.2, p.24.

of the heroine, whom Brandon eventually marries, Caroline Gann, shows Thackeray's compassion for one whose barren emotional life is fulfilled by the reading of sentimental novels. Mrs Gann's snobbish bitchiness, particularly towards Caroline; Gann's continual drinking, and reminiscences about his days of gentility before the arrival of gas ruined his oil business; the vulgar husband-hunting daughters of Mrs Gann's previous marriage; and the overall seediness of Margate itself, are all depicted with a mixture of fascination and repulsion, and with controlled distaste; but at other points in the story, undigested contempt and the humour of farce and caricature again disrupt the firm establishing tone. The other lodger in the Gann boarding house, Brandon's rival, the affected pseudo-artist Andreas Fitch, is crudely treated as a farcical butt; and the plot collapses into farce at the end when the duel between Brandon and Fitch is interrupted by the arrival of a widow, Mrs Carrickfergus, who has been pursuing Fitch across Europe, and who sweeps off with the helpless artist. But in other parts of the story, Thackeray expands his narrative to include meditations which involve the reader in their implications; these meditations are not yet absorbed into the web of the text, but their subject-matter often anticipates the subjects of Thackeray's later musings. In a long aside, Thackeray muses on our hatred, which is based on envy, of 'Lickspittle'; and in another, he meditates on the

role of accident in life.²⁰ The finest generalisation, which anticipates the manner of Vanity Fair, arises from an account of the character of the down-trodden Caroline; the theatrical metaphors, the perceiving of the social basis of weakness, and the awareness of the irresistible demands of the world, all suggest the mature humorous manner:

In our intercourse with the world -- (which is conducted with that kind of cordiality that we see in Sir Harry and my Lady in a comedy -- a couple of painted grinning fools, talking parts that they have learned out of a book) -- as we sit and look at the smiling actors, we get a glimpse behind the scenes from time to time; and alas for the wretched nature that appears there! -- among women especially, who deceive even more than men, having more to hide, feeling more, living more than we who have our business, pleasure, ambition, which carries us abroad. Ours are the great strokes of misfortune, as they are called, and theirs the small miseries. 21

A Shabby Genteel Story was left uncompleted for twenty years because of Thackeray's wife's illness, which culminated in a complete mental breakdown; possibly this experience, and that of witnessing Courvoisier's execution, may have contributed to the pervading tone of compassionate melancholy of The Great Hoggarty Diamond. In this story, Thackeray abandons the presentation of character as caricature and event as farce as sources of humour. Rather does a melancholy and pathetic humorous tone take overall control, with none of the savagery of Yellowplush or Dennis Haggarty's

²⁰ Ibid., Ch. 3, pp. 30-1; Ch. 5, pp. 63-4.

²¹ Ibid., Ch. 1, p. 14.

Wife; and the meditative asides are more successfully integrated into the overall tone. This is achieved through the choice of the narrator, Samuel Titmarsh, whose point of view Thackeray consistently maintains. He is not a villain, but an ordinary, likeable, young man, whose willingness to recognise and admit his own weaknesses and, in the end, to recognise that he has been corrupted, make him a sympathetic figure. At the beginning of the story, he is given a diamond by his aunt, which he sees as the cause of all his good fortune, but which is also a symbol of corruption; the idea of the talismanic function of the diamond contributes to creating the overall unity of structure to which Thackeray was moving at this point in his career. Because the point of view is that of Sam throughout, the humorous characters, such as the eccentric Lady Drum, the vulgar Mrs Roundhand, and the villain, the Dissenter and hypocrite Brough, are not exaggerated portraits, but are toned down. Mrs Roundhand is merely described as 'this great leering vulgar woman', and Sam refuses to relate Brough's hypocrisy to his religious beliefs: 'but though this man was a hypocrite, as I found afterwards, I'm not going to laugh at the family prayers, or say he was a hypocrite because he had them'.²² Sam's chief positive feeling, and the feeling that saves him, is his simple love for his childhood sweetheart Mary, whom he eventually marries; the gentle humour and the appealing pathos with which their wedding is

²² The Great Hoggarty Diamond (1841), Works, vol.6, Ch.4, p.37; Ch.7, p.62.

described reveal Thackeray at his most imaginatively alive. The humour of pathos deepens when Sam finds himself in the Fleet prison; and in the comments on the pathetic pretensions to gentility of many of his fellow-prisoners, Thackeray creates a seamless web of comment, observation, and description, to produce the mature tone of melancholy humour, with its basis in compassion:

The Fives Court was opposite our window; and here is used, very unwillingly at first, but afterwards, I do confess, with much eagerness, to take a couple of hours' daily sport. Ah! It was a strange place. There was an aristocracy there as elsewhere, - amongst other gents, a son of my Lord Deuceace; and many of the men in the prison were as eager to walk with him, and talked of his family as knowingly, as if they were Bond Street bucks. Poor Tidd, especially, was one of these. Of all his fortune he had nothing left but a dressing-case and a flowered dressing-gown; and to these possessions he added a fine pair of moustaches, with which the poor creature strutted about; and though cursing his ill fortune, was, I do believe, as happy whenever his friends brought him a guinea, as he had been during his brief career as a gentleman on town. I have seen sauntering dandies in watering-places ogling the women, watching eagerly for steam-boats and stage-coaches as if their lives depended upon them, and strutting all day in jackets up and down the public walks. Well, there are such fellows in prison: quite as dandified and foolish, only a little more shabby - dandies with dirty beards and holes at their elbows. 23

Perhaps the most successful of Thackeray's various experiments with narrators is his creation of the Fat Contributor, whose accounts of his travels

²³ Ibid., Ch.12, pp.121-2.

in Brighton and the East were published in Punch in 1845-7. In his Fat Contributor papers, Thackeray laid one of the foundations of light humour, in the tone of whimsical irony which later became part of Punch's stock-in-trade, and which covers what were later seen as typically English observations about such topics as trains, food, odd foreigners, and surly waiters. In the Fat Contributor's pieces there is not a trace of former savagery. There is, instead, an amiable recognition of the narrator's own weaknesses and eccentricities: his awareness of his size, his disinclination for physical exercise, his habit of falling in love with beautiful girls, and his exaggerated sense of the power of Punch in foreign lands. The tone is relaxed and urbane, but never slips into the sentimental whimsy of later imitators such as Jerome or Grossmith; what could become the irritating mannerism of describing trivial events in heroic terms is kept in check, and the potential coyness inherent in the Fat Contributor's meeting all his acquaintances, from whom he thought he had escaped, in Brighton, is avoided by the sharpness of the description of the hideous Wheezer family.²⁴

From the appealing slightness of the Fat Contributor's papers, Thackeray made a major advance

²⁴ Papers by the Fat Contributor (1847), Works, vol. 8, 'Brighton in 1847', pp. 386-7.

in his most important series for Punch, the 'Snob' papers of 1846-7, which became The Book of Snobs. The presiding tone of the 'Snob' papers is urbane, a tone of 'playfulness and sentiment',²⁵ as Thackeray described it; but the option of slipping the knife into a particularly blatant target is kept open. Thackeray redefined the meaning of the term 'snob', which had originally merely meant a social outsider, to give it a moral dimension, as he was to do in his attempt to redefine the term 'gentleman'; a snob was a person from any class who 'meanly admires mean things'.²⁶ Since snobbery is pervasive, part of the tainted air which we all breathe, the papers describing the snobs are written by 'One of Themselves', and, in exposing instances of snobbery, Thackeray often reveals his own snobbish tendencies. By now, Thackeray has accepted the weakness of humanity when under social pressures, and, in the 'Snob' papers, this compassion is accompanied by a subtlety of humorous observation which can evoke a whole social milieu by means of a character-sketch or an image. By way of beginning with an anecdote about the custom of washing silver, Thackeray proceeds, through the sustained metaphor of cleansing, to sum up a social process; and the parvenu in this account is not hysterically attacked, but is seen steadily as part of a whole social system:

²⁵ The Book of Snobs (1848), Works, vol.9, Ch.32, p.153.

²⁶ Ibid., Ch.2, p.11.

It used to be the custom of some very old-fashioned clubs in this city, when a gentleman asked for change for a guinea, always to bring it to him in washed silver: that which had passed immediately out of the hands of the vulgar being considered 'as too coarse to soil a gentleman's fingers!'. So, when the City Snob's money has been washed during a generation or so; has been washed into estates, and woods, and castles, and town-mansions, it is allowed to pass current as real aristocratic coin. Old Pump sweeps a shop, runs messages, becomes a confidential clerk and partner. Pump the Second becomes chief of the house, spins more and more money, marries his son to an Earl's daughter. Pump Tertius goes on with the bank; but his chief business in life is to become the father of Pump Quartus, who comes out a full-blown aristocrat, and takes his seat as Baron Pumpington, and his race rules hereditarily over this nation of Snobs. 27

The rich range of individual snobs includes the De Mogyns (originally Muggins) family, the latest offspring of which has joined Young England and 'sleeps in white kid-gloves, and commits dangerous excesses upon green tea';²⁸ the dull and wicked Sir George Granby Tufto; Captain Ragg and ensign Famish, raffish military snobs; Raff and Legg, down-and-out spongers living on the Continent; the country snobs Major and Mrs Ponto; and the club snobs Spavin and Cockspur. The snobs are seen as both pathetic and ridiculous, and occasionally the humour takes on a tincture of the absurd reminiscent of Carlyle, in the 'Court Circular' story about the elaborate etiquette required to obtain a pail of water with which to douse a singeing King, or of the

²⁷ Ibid., Ch.8, pp.42-3.

²⁸ Ibid., Ch.7, p.38.

fantastic grotesque, reminiscent of Dickens, in the account of the vast interiors and furniture of Castle Carabas, where in the huge library there is 'an inkstand on the centre table like the coffin of a baby, and sad portraits staring at you from the bleak walls with their solemn mouldy eyes'.²⁹

At the time of the writing of the 'Snob' papers, Thackeray was forging a humorous tone which was capable of recording his vision of the darker side of human behaviour; a tone of flexible and implicating irony, which modulated between satire and sympathy, avoiding extremes of invention and emotional revelation; and it was this tone which was to diffuse his first masterpiece, Vanity Fair.

5

In Vanity Fair, we are not to witness exaggerated and sensational presentations of actions and emotions; the novel will deal not with the great and heroic, but with the passions and feelings of ordinary life; not a romantic, but a homely story will be told. Life will be seen as the mixed affair it is, offering 'the strangest contrasts laughable and tearful'.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., Ch.28, p.136.

³⁰ Vanity Fair (1848), Works, vol.1, Ch.17, p.197. All further references to Vanity Fair are incorporated into the text.

By stressing the ordinary basis of his story, Thackeray gains the involvement of the reader which is essential if the ironical comedy is to perform its implicating function; but there are sections of the novel in which the reader is deliberately distanced from the events of the action. The mock-heroic irony of the incident in which Becky scores her greatest triumph, when she is presented to the King, allows us to share the joke with the narrator; and one of the uses of laughter of the novel, to expose fools and knaves (vol.1, Ch.8, p.96), can control the almost farce-like incident of the dismissal of James Crawley by his aunt, and the consequent loss of his financial hopes. The distancing tone appears, too, when the victims of the comedy of errors are described; victims such as Amelia, or tragic sufferers like Jane, sacrificed to her father's selfishness as she sits, framed by the Iphigenia clock, sewing in the great empty room in Russell Square, in 'the centre of a system of drawing-rooms' and blighted lives:

The great glass over the mantel-piece, faced by the other great console glass at the opposite end of the room, increased and multiplied between them the brown holland bag in which the chandelier hung; until you saw these brown holland bags fading away in endless perspectives, and this apartment of Miss Osborne's seemed the centre of a system of drawing-rooms. (vol.2, Ch.7, p.87)

The total tone of the novel is extremely complex, and, in its continually oscillating movement, can

arouse our derision or our compassion in direct and powerful ways; yet what might be called the central band of this oscillation, the most frequently heard tone of all, is one which is poised between serious denunciation of selfishness and sympathy for the victims of a system of lies and hypocrisy. Thackeray can suggest that we, 'brother wearers of motley', are both selfish and self-deceived, caught in an unbreakable movement between public pretence and private self-disgust. Death is a subject which can prompt such reflections; in the account of the funeral of Sir Pitt, our duty to the dead is seen as humbug and lies, to be forgotten as soon as we leave the graveyard (vol.2, Ch.6, pp.78-9); and, turning away from the temptation to preach a sermon on the impending death of Miss Crawley, Thackeray, acknowledging that it is only a comedy that the reader has paid for, suggests a contrast between the public bustle and gaiety of Vanity Fair and the private depression of spirits which overtakes the most earnest of those who are bent on pleasure, a depression which often brings to mind the inevitability of death and the uselessness of remembering past pleasures; and the reflection characteristically broadens into an address to the reader: 'Are there not moments when one grows sick of grinning and tumbling, and the jingling of cap and bells?' (vol.1, Ch.19, p.225)

On the other hand, the comedy of life, often involving the contrast between the public and the private life, and invoking the pervasive thematic motif of the disguise, is seen precisely as a matter for a sermon; the shovel-hat and cap and bells merge together as the author, under the pressure to tell the truth about what he sees, becomes both preacher and member of the congregation:

And while the moralist, who is holding forth on the cover (an accurate portrait of your humble servant), professes to wear neither gown nor bands, but only the very same long-eared livery in which his congregation is arrayed: yet, look you, one is bound to speak the truth as far as one knows it, whether one mounts a cap and bells or a shovel-hat; and a deal of disagreeable matter must come out in the course of such an undertaking. (vol.1, Ch.8, p.94)

But what is the truth? In the simplicities of his theories of humour, Thackeray sees the 'weekday preacher' as a confident and assured figure, attacking such vices as hypocrisy. But the practice of even wholesale and deliberate hypocrisy, such as that of Mrs Bute Crawley, when, realising that Miss Crawley's money and property are not to be hers, determines that her disappointment shall not be socially registered, and that appearances will be kept up at whatever cost of private misery, shows a kind of courage in a society in which such hypocrisy may be a condition of social survival. Society would cease, claims the narrator, if people acted on their principles:

Whereas, by a little charity and mutual forbearance, things are made to go on pleasantly enough: we may abuse a man as much as we like, and call him the greatest rascal unchanged - but do we wish to hang him therefore? No. We shake hands when we meet. If his cook is good we forgive him, and go and dine with him; and we expect he will do the same by us. (vol.2, Ch.16, p.194)

The passage is ironical, of course; yet there is the sense behind the observation that those as tainted by the corruptions of society as we are, are not in a position to judge others; the word 'charity' stands for the kind of necessary hypocrisy which we and Thackeray, as men of the world, know acts as the oil to the social wheels; yet the serious moral sense of 'charity', the willingness to forgive others, is implied in the meaning too. It is in the typical movement of his stance revealed in this passage, in which Thackeray both judges and qualifies his judgement, a tactic suggested by the logic of his own position as one of the wearers of motley, that Thackeray reveals his most complex humorous tone. In the following passage, we begin by judging against the openly mercenary attitude of Miss Crawley's relatives; but we are gradually accused of a similar attitude, as the pronoun shifts from 'they' to 'we' and the even more uncomfortable 'you'; but at the height of the implicating movement, the savage exposure threatened by the straight, awkward question, 'Is it so, or is it not so?', dissolves into a tone of playfulness; in this passage, the transitions are as invisible as they are deadly:

What a dignity it gives an old lady, that balance at the banker's! How tenderly we look at her faults if she is a relative (and may every reader have a score of such), what a kind good-natured old creature we find her! How the junior partner of Hobbs and Dobbs leads her smiling to the carriage with the lozenge upon it, and the fat wheezy coachman! How, when she comes to pay us a visit, we generally find an opportunity to let our friends know her station in the world! We say (and with perfect truth) I wish I had Miss MacWhirter's signature to a cheque for five thousand pounds. She wouldn't miss it, says your wife. She is my aunt, say you, in an easy careless way, when your friend asks if Miss MacWhirter is any relative. Your wife is perpetually sending her little testimonies of affection, your little girls work endless worsted baskets, cushions, and footstools for her. What a good fire there is in her room when she comes to pay you a visit, although your wife laces her stays without one! The house during her stay assumes a festive, neat, warm, jovial, snug appearance not visible at other seasons. You yourself, dear sir, forget to go to sleep after dinner, and find yourself all of a sudden (though you invariably lose) very fond of a rubber. What good dinners you have - game every day, Malmsey-Madeira, and no end of fish from London. Even the servants in the kitchen share in the general prosperity; and somehow, during the stay of Miss MacWhirter's fat coachman, the beer is grown much stronger, and the consumption of tea and sugar in the nursery (where her maid takes her meals) is not regarded in the least. Is it so, or is it not so? I appeal to the middle classes. Ah, gracious powers! I wish you would send me an old aunt - a maiden aunt - an aunt with a lozenge on her carriage, and a front of light coffee-coloured hair - how my children should work workbags for her, and my Julia and I would make her comfortable! Sweet - sweet vision! Foolish - foolish dream! (vol.1, Ch.9, p.104)

If impolite prying into the motives of others leads, in the end, to embarrassment and self-incrimination, which are major weaknesses in a society which worships appearance above all else, and which fears most the disturbing of the polite facade, so exposing vice itself in too great detail would shock the reader of the

novel, living as he does in 'the moral world, that has, perhaps, no particular objection to vice, but an insuperable repugnance to hearing vice called by its proper name'. Thackeray, in calling attention to the unwritten laws which forbid him to describe Becky's most shocking exploits.- to his wish 'deferentially to submit to the fashion at present prevailing, and only to hint at the existence of wickedness in a light, easy, and agreeable manner, so that nobody's fine feelings may be offended', can powerfully suggest what he cannot describe, inviting the reader to fill in the details about the behaviour of beautiful mermaids as they dive beneath the waves to start 'revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims' (vol.2, Ch.29, pp.364-5).

Thackeray's use of the polite persona for various kinds of disturbing strategies by which the reader is obliquely assaulted occasionally, however, gives way to a direct, steady tone, when a possible positive alternative to the moral life which dominates *Vanity Fair* is suggested. One such alternative, the concept of the gentleman as a moral rather than a class ideal, is briefly formulated in this novel (vol.2, Ch.27, p.343); but in the end, in a world in which each of us, when having our desire, is still unsatisfied, a steady tone can only focus on one reality, which remains constant through all the pretence and the bustle of the Fair: the reality of death itself. The arch in the stairway on which the

coffin is rested is a permanent 'memento of Life, Death, and Vanity'; and when death comes, 'your comedy and mine will have been played then, and we shall be removed, O how far, from the trumpets, and the shouting, and the posture-making' (vol.2, Ch.26, p.320). It is only then that the ironic perspectives dwindle as the play is played out.

CHAPTER SEVEN.'FANCIFUL TREATMENT': HUMOURIN DICKENS 1836 - 1850

1

It is Dickens who possesses the most complex humorous imagination of any writer since Shakespeare; and unlike Thackeray, whose humorous sensibility gradually developed, Dickens's entire humorous range, not yet fully formed but recognisable in its essentials, is present in his first work, Sketches by Boz. In the novels from Sketches by Boz to Martin Chuzzlewit, the two humorous tendencies discussed above finally and fully merge together, in a synthesis which dissolved after about 1850. In these novels, the fullest possibilities of the moral humorous imagination are realised. What Thackeray called 'a national benefit', and what Forster stressed as the essentially social nature of Dickens's 'leading quality', the presentation of such types of social outcast as Newman Noggs, Tom Pinch, and Mr Dick as worthy of our love and admiration, are the essence of Dickens's Quixotic and sentimental moral humour. In his moral satire too, such as the attacks on the Fleet prison and the Poor Law, and, most impressively, the American sections of Martin Chuzzlewit, Dickens shows the didactic side to his humorous imagination, which came to him through Cervantes, Fielding, and Hogarth; here the tone is direct and powerful, eliciting the reader's anger at injustice and hypocrisy.

Equally powerful, and disturbing in quite another way, however, are Dickens's contributions to the humorous counter-sensibility, where the continuity is with the Falstaff of the Gadshill scene as he transforms reality through his linguistic virtuosity, causing our moral judgement to be suspended. From this basis there developed, from Sketches by Boz through to Martin Chuzzlewit, an increasing tendency to create grotesque transformations of reality of both the genial and terrible kind. Behind this aspect of Dickens's imagination, too, is the Jonson of Volpone and of Sir Epicure Mammon, whose accelerations into fantasy are reproduced in Buzfuz's speech in the trial of Bardell v. Pickwick, and in the language of Squeers and Quilp; there are, too, echoes of the bizarre world of Hoffmann. From Shakespeare and Hogarth, also, Dickens absorbed the central principle of the grotesque technique: that blending of, and continual modulation between, the terrible and the humorous, or the pathetic and the comic; and this modulating movement, which breaks down the distinctions between the comic and the terrible and the pathetic, and which is the unifying element of a whole novel, The Old Curiosity Shop, shows affinities with the styles of Sterne and Carlyle.

But while Dickens's humour explores, in an original way, regions inhabited by such denizens as the Marchioness and Mr Chuffey, its roots remain unselfconsciously in the kinds of characters and

themes of low humour from which Thackeray sought to escape. On the humorous copresence of the complementary modes of dark and genial grotesque, and of traditional satire and original exploration of the emotional consequences of living in the society of the nineteenth century, is superimposed that of standard and conventional humorous writing: for example, Mr Pickwick falling through the ice, or getting caught in the wrong bedroom: and an imaginative conception of original power and force in the same novel: the scenes in the Fleet prison, which modulate between pathos and humour. Most importantly, there is the copresence, often in the same humorous conception, of the moral and the autonomous humorous imagination; Sam Weller is both a celebration of a man of his class and a vehicle for the expression of the fantastic grotesque. From a moral basis, the humour frequently takes off in self-delighting, cumulative, imaginative directions; and in Dickens's greatest humorous work, Martin Chuzzlewit, the full complexity of his humorous vision, all its elements fused together, is present. The moral case for the socially rejected but good of heart is made in Tom Pinch; moral satire, taking off into grotesque fantasy, appears in the American sections, and in the portrait of Pecksniff; and the Falstaffian transformations of Todgers and the grotesques of Bailey, Tigg, and, finest of all, Mrs Gamp, show the autonomous humorous imagination at its most powerful and inventive.

Sketches by Boz extends that tradition of humour which is based on an anecdotal and sociological approach to social reality, a tradition which includes the novels of Scott, the three novels of Galt discussed above, and Surtees's Jorrocks books. Here, humour springs from the genial and tolerant apprehension of the operation of individual foibles in a social context, and there is achieved, in Galt's novels particularly, a perfect balance, in which the fullest claims of both individual expression and social interaction are realised. To this tradition Sketches by Boz is a major contribution; but Dickens's view of social reality and individual action, and the humour by which they are often related, is far more complex than that of Galt, secure in his Enlightenment confidence, or Surtees, casually and genially observing social mobility. Dickens's humour in his first book is both a moral instrument for judging and placing, and it is a transforming instrument, creating new, wondrous configurations from the sights of London for our delight; and sometimes it hovers uneasily between the two.

In many ways Sketches by Boz is an immature book, but it does not deserve the neglect into which, partly on Dickens's own instigation, it has fallen. In these pieces we find Dickens's imagination exercised on subjects and themes which were to appear

again and again in his later work. Here are lawyers, criminals, the shabby-genteel, members of Parliament, apprentices, beadles, prostitutes, theatrical people, circus performers, and the whole teeming life of London's streets and slums; and here, too, are many of the themes which were developed more powerfully in the later work: the pressures of environment, the power of early associations, the vulnerability of children, the oppressiveness of authority, and the reviving power of Christmas. And it is in recording his observations of these people, and in registering his reaction to many of these themes, that Dickens's humorous imagination is fully exercised.

In general terms, this humorous sensibility moves between the didactic expression of social concern and the delighted transformations of reality into grotesque forms, a balance which was increasingly tilted in favour of the grotesque mode as Dickens's career progressed. Along with an originality of humorous vision, too, there goes much conventional humour, producing stock comic figures in conventional poses. Comic situations involving spinsters, widows, bachelors, the genteel, and the snobbish appear in the framework of conventional farce-like exposures and denouements, revealing the essentially theatrical nature of the influence behind them. Familiar figures, such as the curate who attracts the attention of the ladies through his supposedly consumptive state,

and the half-pay captain who is given to harmless practical jokes but who is a 'charitable, open-hearted old fellow at bottom, after all',¹ appear; and two of the Tales offer traditional treatments of the downfall of those who snobbishly wish to increase their social pretensions. In 'Horatio Sparkins', the snobbish Mr Malderton is deceived by the dandified Horatio into believing that he is a person of some consequence, but the young man turns out to be a shop assistant; and in 'The Tuggses at Ramsgate', a family of grocers is swindled out of its recently acquired wealth by professional swindlers at genteel Ramsgate. In exploring these themes, however, Dickens shows none of Hook's venom; and, as with almost everything he wrote, Dickens gives an individual imaginative character to the most hackneyed of ideas; but 'Horatio Sparkins' and 'The Tuggses at Ramsgate' reveal Dickens's humour at its most traditionally predictable, as it dutifully exposes snobbery and social pretensions.

Another target for exposure is the more menacing figure who represents oppressive authority, such as the beadle in the Parish sketches. The tone of anger behind the account of the antics of the pompous, unfeeling parish officer was to emerge more fully later in the portrait of Bumble; in the Sketches, the treatment is lighter. By his imposing appearance, the beadle overawes the poor woman whom he accompanies home, and when he appears on Sundays to usher the

¹ Sketches by Boz (1836, The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 1957), Our Parish, Ch.2, p.8; Ch.2, p.12.

children to church and to control their behaviour, he wears his best clothes, including his state-coat and cocked hat, and carries a staff for show and a cane for use. When he supervises the putting out of a fire, however, he appears in a less imposing light, since the hose had not been connected to the water supply. The absurdity of authority is registered, too, in the account of the election for beadle, in which the candidates' chances mainly depend on the number of their children; and Dickens gives his first parody of the pompous 'Parliamentary' style of speaking in election speeches.²

But there is another moral tone which is present in the Sketches; a weightier, more worried tone, which voices a fear of the consequences of social problems. This anxious tone, which is not present in Galt or in Surtees, often modulates from an establishing humorous tone, into, usually, one of rather nervous facetiousness, revealing that Dickens is half-fascinated by what he fears; this ability to enter into the life of what terrified him became, in the portraits of Fagin and Quilp, a major strength of his humour. In 'The Pawnbroker's Shop', one of the Scenes, the tirade of the woman in the pawnshop against the drunken wife-beater is not only lively, but is orchestrated by Dickens to convey the exact changes of tone and emphasis; when she is told to go and hang herself, and wait to be cut down, she replies,

² Ibid., Our Parish, Ch.4, 'The Election for Beadle', pp.18-24.

'Cut you down,' rejoins the woman, 'I wish I had the cutting of you up, you wagabond! (loud.) Oh! you precious wagabond! (rather louder.) Where's your wife, you willin? (louder still; women of this class are always sympathetic, and work themselves into a tremendous passion at the shortest notice.) Your poor dear wife, as you uses worser nor a dog - strike a woman - you a man! (very shrill;) I wish I had you - I'd murder you, I would, if I died for it! ' 3

The final point of the sketch is to indicate the dangers of moral depravity, wife-beating, and prostitution; and the sketch as a whole uneasily combines a tone of moral anxiety and exhortation, and the urge to bring to vivid life the people observed. At its worst, the humorous observation slips into a heavily facetious tone, in which the nervous use of latinisms betrays the lack of firm direction of the humour, as when the wife-beater kicks his wife out of the shop:

'Go home yourself,' retorts the husband again, enforcing his argument by a blow which sends the poor creature flying out of the shop. Her 'natural protector' follows her up the court, alternately venting his rage in accelerating her progress, and in knocking the little scanty blue bonnet of the unfortunate child over its still more scanty and faded-looking face. 4

In 'Gin-Shops', too, there is a similarly unsteady blending of humorous mimicry: in the account of the customers being served by the barmaid, and in the vivid description of the bar itself and

³ Ibid., Scenes, Ch.23, 'The Pawnbroker's Shop', p.192.

⁴ Ibid., p.193.

the barrels which dominate it, 'bearing such inscriptions as "Old Tom, 549"; "Young Tom, 360"; "Samson, 1421": and the moral purpose of the sketch, which is that until the problems of poverty are cured, ginshops will continue to ply their evil trade.⁵

But it is neither in the conventional treatment of stock themes, nor in the humour which brings to life social reality in order to convey a moral exhortation about it, that the most original element in Dickens's humorous range is employed. This new tone is one which, detached from a moral basis, joyfully recreates the life of London for our delight and wonder; it is the medium through which we see the familiar made strange before our eyes. This tone is a complex one, passing through several phases. There is the basis of observation, which is followed by the entering into the life of the person or thing being described, in an animating activity which sometimes emerges as a grotesque apprehension. This movement, from observation to what Dickens called 'fanciful treatment', is partly the result of the exasperated feeling that Dickens was to record again in his career that people simply do not observe what is going on around them: 'nothing short of being knocked down by a porter, or run over by a cab' would disturb the equanimity of many people.⁶ And it is

⁵ Ibid., Scenes, Ch.22, p.185.

⁶ Ibid., Scenes, Ch.3, 'Shops and their Tenants', p.59.

partly the feeling, recorded years later, that realistic description is not enough; that grim reality has to be somehow transformed into ideal shapes, a process for which humour is eminently suitable as the transforming medium. It was this belief in idealisation, by which the familiar is to be seen in a romantic light, which Dickens apologised for as his 'infirmity', the trick of seeing unlikely connexions between things, later in his career:

'It does not seem to me to be enough to say of any description that it is the exact truth. The exact truth must be there; but the merit or art in the narrator, is the manner of stating the truth. As to which thing in literature, it always seems to me that there is a world to be done. And in these times, when the tendency is to be frightfully literal and catalogue-like - to make the thing, in short, a sort of sum in reduction that any miserable creature can do in that way - I have an idea (really founded on the love of what I profess), that the very holding of popular literature through a kind of popular dark age, may depend on such fanciful treatment.' 7

The typical stance of the observer of London life of the Sketches is one of eager interest in what he sees, and the consequent urge to speculate about it. 'Speculation' is a key word in the Sketches, coming up again and again. 'What inexhaustible food for speculation do the streets of London afford! '

⁷ Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, Book 9, Ch.1, pp.727-8. For a similar statement, that people do not even observe faces, see the 1858 Preface to Dombey and Son, Clarendon Edition, p.834.

exclaims Boz at the beginning of his account of 'Shops and their Tenants';⁸ he likes to wander along Monmouth Street, where old-clothes shops are situated, in order 'to indulge in the speculations to which they give rise';⁹ he opens 'Our Next-Door Neighbour' by elaborating on the fantastic idea of a parallel between the appearance of the several door-knockers and the characters of the people in the houses whose fronts they decorate, and here speculation leads to a grotesque animation of the inanimate:

We are very fond of speculating as we walk through a street, on the character and pursuits of the people who inhabit it; and nothing so materially assists us in these speculations as the appearance of the house doors. The various expressions of the human countenance afford a beautiful and interesting study; but there is something in the physiognomy of street-door knockers, almost as characteristic, and nearly as infallible. Whenever we visit a man for the first time, we contemplate the features of his knocker with the greatest curiosity, for we well know, that between the man and his knocker, there will inevitably be a greater or less degree of resemblance and sympathy. 10

Boz then gives a series of examples which illustrate this whimsical idea. If you see a knocker with a cheerful face of a lion on it, you are sure of a welcome inside; a knocker with the face of a ferocious lion on it suggests a selfish inhabitant; a sharp, pert knocker suggest a self-important person, and a knocker in the shape of a

⁸ Sketches by Boz, Scenes, Ch. 5, p. 59.

⁹ Ibid., Ch. 6, p. 75.

¹⁰ Ibid., Our Parish, Ch. 7, p. 40.

wreath denotes cold and formal people. This sketch is one of the most ambitious of the whole series; and, like Lamb's essay on 'Poor Relations', it is an exercise in modulation. In the Dickens sketch, the modulation is from the opening fanciful humour through more conventional humorous material, describing the characters of lodgers who inhabit the house, to the final pathos of the description of the death of a young boy through consumption.

This urge for restless speculation often allows Dickens to enter extensively into the lives of people and of things. A compassionate humour is used to evoke the state of 'the numerous class of people' who live alone and uncared for in London, in the sketch called 'Shabby-Genteel People'. One such man attracted the attention of Boz, as he walked compulsively up and down in the park; and the narrator deduces, from his outward appearance, the man's whole life: the dreary office job, a lonely meal, and back to the lodgings to sleep. The comic pathos of the man's situation is conveyed, too, in the incident in which his attempt to improve his appearance by applying a 'reviver' liquid to his clothes met with disaster when the rain washed the liquid off, leaving the clothes more shabby than they were before.¹¹

But ordinary and commonplace things are brought most vividly to life by means of fantastic, grotesque

¹¹ Ibid., Characters, Ch. 10, pp. 264-5.

humour, which dominates two excellent pieces, 'Early Coaches' and 'Meditations in Monmouth Street'. In 'Early Coaches', the experience of catching a coach at six o'clock on a cold winter's morning is vividly evoked, and filled with the speculations and similes of Boz at his most fantastic. The recesses in the booking-room 'look like the dens of the smaller animals in a travelling menagerie, without the bars', and in the morning sleet the policemen 'look as if they had been carefully sprinkled with powdered glass'; and before he gets up for his journey, the traveller has terrific dreams about stage-coaches, clocks, and trunk-makers, and the hammering of the trunk-maker's assistant in the dream becomes the rapping of the servant on the bedroom door as the traveller wakes for his journey.¹² In 'Meditations in Monmouth Street', Boz brings to life the clothes in the Monmouth Street shops, those burial places of the fashions, as he indulges in the speculations to which the rows of clothes give rise:

We love to walk among these extensive groves of the illustrious dead, and to indulge in the speculations to which they give rise; now fitting a deceased coat, then a dead pair of trousers, and anon the mortal remains of a gaudy waistcoat, upon some being of our own conjuring up, and endeavouring, from the shape and fashion of the garment itself, to bring its former owner before our mind's eye. We have gone on speculating in this way, until whole rows of coats have started from their pegs, and buttoned up, of their own accord, round the waists of imaginary wearers; lines of trousers have jumped down to meet them; waistcoats have almost burst with anxiety to put themselves on; and half an acre of shoes

¹² Ibid., 'Early Coaches', Scenes, Ch. 15, pp. 133-5.

have suddenly found feet to fit them, and gone stumping down the street with a noise which has fairly awakened us from our pleasant reverie, and driven us slowly away, with a bewildered stare, an object of astonishment to the good people of Monmouth Street, and of no slight suspicion to the policemen at the opposite street corner. 13

He sees a whole row of clothes which might have been worn by the same individual at different times of his life, and constructs 'the man's whole life' of childhood, brutal youth and manhood, dissipation and descent into criminality, and the suffering that this causes to his wife and children, from the array of clothes he sees; and the piece ends with a grotesque dance of sets of clothes and shoes in a corps de ballet, until the reverie is broken by the lady of the shop. In its perfectly controlled modulation from humour to pathos and back to humour again, the sketch stands out as one of the most original in the collection; and the fantastic, animating imagination it reveals was to be an important aspect of Dickens's humorous range.

3

In The Pickwick Papers, too, there is a mixture of the humour of the traditional kind and humour of a uniquely Dickensian and original sort. Obvious and stock comic situations are exploited in the early

¹³ Ibid., 'Meditations in Monmouth Street', Scenes, Ch.6, p.75.

sporting sections, and in later incidents, too, when Mr Pickwick falls through the ice or is wheeled, drunk and reposing in a wheelbarrow, to the pound. But even in the handling of such stock situations, Dickens bestows upon them a detailed imaginative vitality which is rarely absent from the most routine parts of his writing; the account of the irascible Captain Boldwig, who finds the drunken Pickwick, and Tupman's cries of '"Fire!"', as Pickwick falls through the ice, show that invention is constantly working.¹⁴ But, as in Sketches by Boz, Dickens's humorous imagination is working on several levels, the profoundly original as well as the conventional level; and this imagination is at its most complex when engaged in depicting the Wellers.

One of the obvious comic contrasts in the novel is that between Pickwick's innocence and Sam's experience, an experience which was acquired when Sam was a child in the London streets, fending for himself when he was '"pitched neck and crop into the world, to play at leap-frog with its troubles"'. This experience is the source of Sam's confidence and cheerfulness, a cheerfulness which often takes the form of anecdotes about common life, such as the story about the 'twopenny rope' in which he describes how the beds of some lodging houses are made of lengths of rope slung across the room with sacking

¹⁴ The Pickwick Papers (1837, Penguin English Library Edition, 1972), Ch. 19, pp. 338-40; Ch. 30, p. 501. All further references to The Pickwick Papers and to subsequent novels of Dickens (apart from the first citation) are incorporated into the text.

on top of them, so that when the ropes are slackened, the lodgers fall out of bed, instead of lying there all the morning (Ch.16, pp.290-1). Sam can also enlighten his master about the corruption of local elections, in the story of how his father was bribed to tip a party of voters from his coach into the canal (Ch.13, pp.247-8); and he can gently hint to Pickwick the real nature of prison life in his 'philosophical' comment on the birdcage in the turnkey's office: "'Veels vithin veels, a prison in a prison'" (Ch.40, p.662). Sam determines to go to prison with his master 'on principle', the same ground on which Pickwick has taken his stand; and he accompanies his revelation with the grotesque story about the man who killed himself on principle to show that crumpets were wholesome, a story which brings out both the absurdity and courage of Pickwick's decision to defy Dodson and Fogg (Ch.44, pp.707-9).

But however grotesquely embroidered Sam's stories are, their basis is in a precisely-imagined social experience. Much of Sam's linguistic versatility is directed at defying the various kinds of authority which attempt to intimidate and control people of his social class; and in many parts of the book, Sam demonstrates, by his wit and humorous resources, his refusal to be victimised by lawyers, magistrates, the Bath footmen, and Stiggins. The humorous impudence that Sam displays suggests a social hope that individuals can somehow remain themselves in degrading situations;

and Sam is intensely admired by Dickens for his refusal to go under. When he is brought before Nupkins the magistrate, Sam brushes aside all the pompous trappings of the law, and addresses the magistrate as if he was a human being rather than a fearful embodiment of an abstract principle, as the stupid arresting officer Grummer believes himself to be: "My name's Law" (Ch.24, p.415). Nupkins is outraged by Sam's familiarity, an approach before which the whole edifice of officialdom collapses as Sam introduced Mr Pickwick and his friends properly, thrusting aside the amazed Grummer:

'Now, Grummer, who is that person?' said Mr Nupkins...

'This here's Pickvick, your wash-up,' said Grummer.

'Come, none o' that 'ere, old Strike-a-light,' interposed Mr Weller, elbowing himself into the front rank. 'Beg your pardon, sir, but this here officer o' yourn in the gambooge tops, 'ull never earn a decent livin' as a master o' the ceremonies any vere. This here, sir', continued Mr Weller, thrusting Grummer aside, and addressing the magistrate with pleasant familiarity, 'This here, is S. Pickvick, Esquire ...Business first, pleasure arterwards, as King Richard the Third said wen he stabbed the t'other king in the Tower, afore he smothered the babbies.' (Ch.25, pp.422-3)

Sam's remarks cause the magistrate to bully and bluster all the more; and the scene is repeated in its essentials when Sam confronts the browbeating of Buzfuz in the Bardell v. Pickwick trial, in which the stale tricks of the lawyer to intimidate witnesses, such as making a show of writing an answer down very carefully, are defeated by Sam's humorous self-possession;

his exposure of Dodson and Fogg turns the tables on the villains, and he is removed from the box before he can do any more damage. Sam is also unimpressed by the snobbish behaviour of the Bath footmen whose Swarry he attends; he refers to the chairman, a pompous man in crimson livery, as 'Blazes', and uses his wit to dislodge him from his monopoly of the fire:

'Sorry to keep the fire off you, Weller,' said Mr Tuckle, with a familiar nod. 'Hope you're not cold, Weller.'

'Not by no means, Blazes,' replied Sam. 'It 'ud be a wery chilly subject as felt cold wen you stood opposit. You'd save coals if they put you behind the fender in the waitin' room at a public office, you would.' (Ch. 37, p. 611)

Sam's greatest triumph over authority is when, in collaboration with his father, he defeats the hypocritical Stiggins, who preys on those women who fall for his blend of temperance propaganda and religious cant, finally exposing the 'shepherd' after the death of Mrs Weller. Tony Weller responds to the bullying intolerance of this kind of religion by knocking down the shepherd's superior, who had referred to him as a 'miserable sinner'; and he later characterises the activities of Stiggins by the use of the term 'gammon', of which young ladies are often the victims. The Wellers gain much satisfaction by attending a meeting of the Brick Lane Branch of the United Grand Junction Ebenezer Temperance Association, at which Stiggins appears drunk, breaking up the

meeting in disorder. The Wellers' response to Stiggins is the sane, instinctive reaction to what they recognise as another example of the informal conspiracy of authority to diminish and degrade them, but their humorous resilience enables them to turn the tables on their adversary; like Sam's stories about his experiences, the reaction against Stiggins shows the social uses of the humorous sensibility.

The relationship between Sam and his father is itself one of the great humorous achievements of the novel; although it is based on a series of casual encounters, the relationship is deep, having its basis in that uneducated wisdom which, in Tony's case, is a mixture of acuteness, as on the subject of Stiggins, and the wildest fantasy, as on the subjects of 'widders', alibis, and the English language generally, which Tony imaginatively transforms into wonderful and individual configurations. Like Sterne's Uncle Toby, Tony Weller sees reality in a highly idiosyncratic way; and he too is invested with a humorous pathos which exalts him into our affections, and of which his letter on the death of his wife, which is couched in coaching metaphors, is a sublime example. Here the humour is without a social dimension, but acts, as does Mrs Nickleby's lament over the dead Smike, as a comic assertion of individual identity in the face of the inevitable end:

... 'her veels was immedety greased and everythink done to set her agoin as could be inwented your farther had hopes as she would have vorked round as usual but just as she was a turnen the corner my boy she took the wrong road and vent down hill with a welocity you never see and notvithstandin that the drag was put on drectly by the medikel man it wornt of no use at all for she paid the last pike at twenty minutes afore six o'clock yesterday evenin havin done the journey wery much under the reglar time vich praps was partly owen to her havin taken in wery little luggage...' (Ch.52, p.826)

Pathos and humour are brilliantly blended, too, in the sustained section on the Fleet prison, in which Dickens shows his grasp of a system which can reduce people to degradation, and possibly to death. Mr Pickwick learns of the various ways in which the system works; how it is possible to buy bail, how a room can be rented, how drink can be got out of the prison, how those on the 'poor side' who have no money live, and how the rot of the 'jailbird air' infects those within the walls of the Fleet:

There were many classes of people here, from the labouring man in his fustian jacket, to the broken-down spendthrift in his shawl dressing-gown, most appropriately out at elbows; but there was the same air about them all - a listless jail-bird careless swagger; a vagabondish who's-afraid sort of bearing, which is wholly indescribable in words, but which any man can understand in one moment if he wish, by setting foot in the nearest debtor's prison, and looking at the very first group of people he sees there, with the same interest as Mr Pickwick did. (Ch.41, p.666)

In bringing this general picture to life by describing individual cases, Dickens modulates from

pathos to humour, producing a complex texture which reveals his imagination working at full power. The tragic story of the Chancery prisoner, culminating in the masterly pathos of his death as he listens to the restless noise in the street outside (a conception which reappears at the beginning of The Old Curiosity Shop, where the impression of restless movement of feet heard through delirium is an image of the restless modulations of the novel as a whole), is blended with the comic story of the cobbler who sleeps under the table because it reminds him of sleeping in a four-poster, and who was ruined by becoming a legatee, since he had to pay the legal costs as they accumulated during the process of contesting the will. But perhaps the most telling comment on the power of an institution to degrade those who become its victims is provided when Mr Pickwick meets Jingle inside the walls of the Fleet. Jingle is one of Dickens's great humorous characters, since, like Dick Swiveller and Mr Micawber, he genially transforms reality into strange shapes through his idiosyncratic way with language; and sometimes his verbal fantasies, which are purely linguistic phenomena, and not, like Sam Weller's stories, rooted in social reality, have a macabre edge to them, as in his account of the deaths of Donna Christina, in love with Jingle but constitutionally undermined by the failure to remove a stomach-pump used for extracting prussic acid from her system, and her father, Don Bolaro Fizzgig, discovered weeks later:

'Remorse and misery,' replied the stranger.
 'Sudden disappearance - talk of the whole city
 - search made everywhere - without success -
 public fountain in the great square suddenly
 ceased playing - weeks elapsed - still a stoppage
 - workmen employed to clean it - water drawn
 off - father-in-law discovered sticking head
 first in the main pipe, with a full confession
 in his right boot - took him out, and the
 fountain played away again, as well as ever.'
 (Ch.2, p.81)

But inside the Fleet, Jingle's old ebullience and resilience have gone, replaced by the listless apathy which infects the prison population as a whole; Mr Pickwick is moved by this change and his reaction is, typically, to give Jingle some money. Jingle's case is shocking because his whole former comic confidence, revealed in his self-delighting linguistic flights of fantasy, has been destroyed by an institution which claims the innocent and the guilty alike, bringing not only Pickwick and Sam into its orbit, but Mrs Bardell as well.

The collapse of Jingle's resilience brings home forcefully the deadening effects of the environment of the Fleet prison; and the humour of this section of the novel serves to emphasise the power of such an environment as a destructive force. But such is the complexity of Dickens's humorous sensibility, that the very means whereby Pickwick got into the prison in the first place, the trial for breach of promise, is presented in a joyous, celebratory way; just as Shakespeare both delighted in and feared Falstaff, so Dickens delights in the very rhetoric by which Pickwick

is condemned to the Fleet. By contrast with the Bardell v. Pickwick trial, the trial of Mr Jorrocks for trespass shows the operation of a heavier humorous method; the leaden monotony of the lawyers' speeches, the recourse to dreadful puns ("I say that a grosser attack was never made upon the character of any grocer"), and the use of crude insult (the prosecution describes Jorrocks as "that great, red-faced, coarse, vulgar-looking, lubberly lump of humanity"), confine the scene to one level of unvaried vulgarity.¹⁵ There is no attempt to build up the atmosphere of the court-room by Surtees; by contrast, Dickens's imagination is continually working, in creating the opening incidents of the swearing-in of the chemist who fears that his unqualified assistant will dispense poison by mistake, and the drama of the arrangement of Mrs Bardell and her son for the benefit of the jury. There are no puns, and no extremes of insult or abuse; the furthest Buzfuz goes is in referring to Pickwick's "revolting heartlessness, and...systematic villainy" (Ch.34, p.561). Where Surtees uses brutal methods to describe brutal facts, Dickens's humorous imagination transforms the malice of Buzfuz's speech, behind which lies a system of tyrannical oppression, into linguistic flights of the greatest delicacy. The repertoire of stale lawyers' tricks becomes the subject of a profoundly inventive imagination, which finds in the cadences of the lawyer's comments a strange, comic beauty, of the kind that Jonson found in Volpone and

¹⁵ Jorrocks's Jaunts and Jollities, Ch.3, pp.49-50.

Mammon, that Shakespeare found in Falstaff, and that Swift found in the Hack of A Tale of a Tub.
Pickwick's letters, claims Buzfuz,

'bespeak the character of the man. They are not open, fervent, eloquent epistles, breathing nothing but the language of affectionate attachment. They are covert, sly, underhanded communications, but, fortunately, far more conclusive than if couched in the most glowing language and the most poetic imagery - letters that must be viewed with a cautious and suspicious eye - letters that were evidently intended at the time, by Pickwick, to mislead and delude any third parties into whose hands they might fall. Let me read the first:-
"Garraway's, twelve o'clock. Dear Mrs B.- Chops and Tomata sauce. Yours, PICKWICK."
Gentlemen, what does this mean? Chops and Tomata sauce. Yours, Pickwick! Chops! Gracious heavens! and Tomata sauce! Gentlemen, is the happiness of a sensitive and confiding female to be trifled away, by such shallow artifices as these?'...(Ch.34, pp.562-3)

In 'Early Coaches' and 'Meditations in Monmouth Street', the humorous imagination transformed the everyday, throwing over the sights of ordinary life a wonderful and mysterious aura; in the speech of Buzfuz, it is not ordinary life which is made transcendent by a self-delighting humour, but a system whose painful and oppressive effects Dickens knew from experience. The standard rhetoric of the lawyer, typical of the worn-out tricks of countless of his fellow professionals, becomes a precisely individual utterance, a self-contained world of humorous invention, given its power through Dickens's mimetic ability to identify with what he most fears, and to turn the feared object into something over which the humorous imagination can play.

The Pickwick Papers shows that the humorous promise of Sketches by Boz was sustained, consolidated, and, in the trial scene, the depiction of Jingle, and the treatment of Sam and his father, extended; the autonomous humorous imagination could build on these achievements. In Oliver Twist, however, the humour frequently falters, and shows an uncertainty of direction. In the opening section on the Poor Law, once again a facetiousness of tone reveals that Dickens has not fully transformed his anger for artistic uses; the jeering sarcasm of much of this section reminds us of the similar difficulties of Thackeray, in his unsuccessful attempts to humorously control distressing experiences. Some of the heavy facetiousness seems to have no satirical point, and the latinisms betray the lack of direction of the irony, as when Oliver's birth is described: 'The fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration, - a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence.'¹⁶ The sarcastic tone veers uncertainly between simple jeering: 'What a noble illustration of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep!' (Ch.2, p.9) and heavy irony about the 'wise and humane regulations' of the 'very sage, deep, philosophical men' (Ch.2, pp.9-10) of the Board;

¹⁶ Oliver Twist, (1838, Clarendon Edition), Ch.1, p.1.

such shrill uncertainty all too clearly betrays the fact that Dickens has not artistically mastered his feelings of outraged anger.

The treatment of Bumble as a representative of a cruel system, however, shows Dickens's humour under greater control; although, even here, there are inconsistencies and unconvincing touches. The clue to Bumble's character is given in the scene in which the effects of drinking gin-and-water with Mrs Mann are beginning to wear off, and he begins to revert to his official character as an embodiment of the system: 'for the temporary blandness which gin-and-water awakens in some bosoms had by this time evaporated: and he was once again a beadle' (Ch.2, p.8). Like Grummer in The Pickwick Papers, Bumble sees himself as the official embodiment of the law, in this case of the new Poor Law, which was based on the idea that poverty is a crime, and should be punished with severity. He is Dickens's comment on the ability and willingness of an ordinary, limited, and stupid individual to justify the most brutal injustice in the name of the law; and his treatment is successful when Dickens is insisting on his official role. He is 'once again a beadle' on those occasions when he gives vent to his indignation at the ingratitude of both the pauper who was obstinate enough to die in the street, and of the woman who refused medicine provided at random in a blacking-bottle;

and he is a beadle when he concludes that Oliver's outburst against Noah Claypole is due to a diet of meat, and when he complacently contemplates the seal depicting the Good Samaritan on his button:

'Yes, I think it is rather pretty,' said the beadle, glancing proudly downwards at the large brass buttons which embellished his coat. 'The die is the same as the parochial seal - the Good Samaritan healing the sick and bruised man. The board presented it to me on New-year's morning, Mr Sowerberry. I put it on, I remember, for the first time, to attend the inquest on that reduced tradesman, who died in a doorway at midnight.' (Ch.4,p.21)

Like the great comic characters created by Dickens's predecessors, Bumble inhabits a world which is shaped by his own fantasies, but these fantasies are not the private and genial thoughts of a Toby Shandy or a Tony Weller; they are rooted in the strange vision of social reality which caused the creation of the new provisions for the poor. From the fantasy of a Chadwick springs a world controlled by a Bumble, who sees himself as a Good Samaritan, and who believes that paupers live on meat; and in showing the outcome of such a system run by such people, Dickens deploys a powerful weapon in his humorous armoury. But there are occasions in which Bumble steps out of his role as the embodiment of a monstrous system, and takes on other kinds of life and significance, which cut across his main function. Dickens's humorous energy cannot be satisfied by confining Bumble to his original limitations; even in the case of such an odious man, his creator cannot

help revealing a love for his creation, a love which comes out in the scene when, left alone after being accepted by Mrs Corney, Bumble's behaviour displays that energy in excess of what the situation requires which marks out the great humorous character:

Mr. Bumble's conduct on being left to himself, was rather inexplicable. He opened the closet, counted the teaspoons, weighed the sugar-tongs, closely inspected a silver milk-pot to ascertain that it was of the genuine metal; and, having satisfied his curiosity on these points, put on his cocked hat corner-wise, and danced with much gravity four distinct times round the table. Having gone through this very extraordinary performance, he took off the cocked hat again; and, spreading himself before the fire with his back towards it, seemed to be mentally engaged in taking an exact inventory of the furniture. (Ch.23, p.151)

But the other ways in which Bumble steps out of his original role are less felicitous than this one; they show a loss of control, manifested as an inconsistency in the character. One such inconsistency occurs when Oliver, being taken to work for Sowerberry by Bumble, breaks down in tears; and Bumble's reaction indeed strikes 'an astonishing false note':¹⁷

Mr. Bumble regarded Oliver's piteous and helpless look, with some astonishment, for a few seconds; hemmed three or four times in a husky manner, and, after muttering something about 'that troublesome cough', bid Oliver dry his eyes and be a good boy. Then, once more taking his hand, he walked on with him in silence. (Ch.4, pp.23-4)

¹⁷ John Carey, The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination (1973), p.68.

We are, too, required, rather unreasonably, to assume an attitude of sympathy for Bumble in his marital difficulties, a sympathy which confirms our assent to Bumble's famous comment on that law which supposes the wife to act under the direction of her husband: ' "the law is a ass" ' (Ch.51, p.354). The comment is reasonable enough, but it comes awkwardly from Bumble.

If Bumble shows Dickens's humorous imagination not quite fully in control, Fagin shows how Dickens can be fired by a conception into an almost inarticulate energy. So deeply does Fagin stir his creator's fascination and fear, that Dickens seems to be making him up as he goes along; onto the original humorous basis are piled a series of impressionistic images, culminating in the final delirium of Fagin's own mind at his trial and in the death cell. The sordid world in which Fagin moved, too, called up contradictory feelings of fascination and repulsion in Dickens's mind; the 'picture' of the interior of the Three Cripples Inn is fired with a Hogarthian energy, in which the moral condemnation ('Cunning, ferocity, and drunkenness in all its stages, were there, in their strongest aspects') cannot conceal a relish at the energy which the scene gives out:

It was curious to observe some faces which stood out prominently from among the group. There was the chairman himself,

(the landlord of the house,) a coarse, rough, heavy-built fellow, who, while the songs were proceeding, rolled his eyes hither and thither, and, seeming to give himself up to joviality, had an eye for everything that was done, and an ear for everything that was said - and sharp ones, too. Near him, were the singers: receiving, with professional indifference, the compliments of the company: and applying themselves, in turn, to a dozen proffered glasses of spirits and water, tendered by their more boisterous admirers; whose countenances, expressive of almost every vice in almost every grade, irresistibly attracted the attention, by their very repulsiveness. Cunning, ferocity, and drunkenness in all its stages, were there, in their strongest aspects; and women: some with the last lingering tinge of their early freshness, almost fading as you looked: others with every mark and stamp of their sex utterly beaten out, and presenting but one loathsome blank of profligacy and crime: some mere girls, others but young women, and none past the prime of life: formed the darkest and saddest portion of this dreary picture. (Ch.26, p.164)

Fagin represents a blending of humour and horror, but not of the controlled kind which we find in the macabre figure of Quilp. In the depiction of Fagin, image succeeds image with bewildering rapidity; it is not clear what his character is, since it is conceived in a series of superimposed dimensions. He is seen, on one level, as a series of energetic and passionate comic/terrifying gestures which, like Bumble's dance, externalise his will: he shakes his fist at the departing Sikes; he crushes an imaginary enemy between his fingers; he hugs himself with pleasure; he bows ceremonially to Oliver when the boy rejoins the gang. On this series of impressions is placed another, a series of images, in terms of which he is seen by Dickens and the other characters: he is a

merry old gentleman; a reptile, seemingly engendered by the slime through which he moves; the devil with a great-coat on; a demon; a goblin, as he watches Noah and Charlotte; a dog or a rat; and finally, like the men he had known who had ended on the scaffold, a heap of dangling clothes. To this array of impressions can be added the public and the private Fagin. Sometimes the mask is removed, when he gloats over his jewels, ecstatically soliloquising about the dead men he has known, unaware that he is being watched by Oliver; when he threatens the lives of the whole gang, inflamed by passion; and when, in the final terror of the death cell, he goes over his past life in a confusion of raving. The masks which cover such terrors, like his gestures, are often humorous ones; Oliver's original training in the art of picking pockets is given in terms of a comic game, with Fagin acting this part as he acts so many others:

The merry old gentleman: placing a snuff-box in one pocket of his trousers, a note-case in the other, and a watch in his waistcoat-pocket: with a guard-chain round his neck: and sticking a mock diamond pin in his shirt: buttoned his coat tight round him, and putting his spectacle-case and handkerchief in his pockets, trotted up and down the room with a stick, in imitation of the manner in which old gentlemen walk about the streets any hour in the day. Sometimes he stopped at the fire-place, and sometimes at the door; making belief that he was staring with all his might into shop-windows. At such times, he would look constantly round him, for fear of thieves; and keep slapping all his pockets in turn, to see that he hadn't lost anything; in such a very funny and natural manner, that Oliver laughed till the tears ran down his face. (Ch.9, p.54)

Even when Oliver has realised the true nature of the activities of the gang, he still finds Fagin funny; Fagin demonstrates the power of humour to overcome moral feelings, a power which the humour of Dickens frequently shows:

At other times, the old man would tell them stories of robberies he had committed in his younger days: mixed up with so much that was droll and curious, that Oliver could not help laughing heartily, and showing that he was amused in spite of all his better feelings. (Ch.18, p.120)

Fagin is so powerful and pervasive a figure that he appears to Oliver in a kind of hallucination, at the window of a country cottage which seems remote from the world of the city and its criminal population; and his whole presentation has about it the character of an hallucination, as image succeeds image. This sense of dream-like progression reaches an appropriately nightmarish climax in the account of Fagin at his trial and in the death-cell, when we finally enter the processes of his mind as he watches the crowds in the court and as he goes over the events of his life in confused terror. Here Dickens has moved, impelled by the power of his imagination at its fullest, into the kinds of grotesque presentation which are the imaginative basis of The Old Curiosity Shop, a novel which is an exercise in modulation between the grotesque, of both the genial and the terrifying kind, and the pathetic, modes, the basis of which is the opening image, an elaboration of

both the final phase of Fagin's presentation and the feverish visions of the dying Chancery prisoner in The Pickwick Papers, of restless delirium.

5

The Old Curiosity Shop (Nicholas Nickleby) is omitted from this discussion, since its humour, brilliant as much of it is, represents a process of consolidation rather than advance) marks the coming to full maturity of Dickens's grotesque humour. The possibilities inherent in the description of the animated clothes in the shops of Monmouth Street, in the macabre anecdotes of Jingle and Sam Weller, in the presentation of the Chancery prisoner, and in the delineation of Fagin, come to creative fruition in The Old Curiosity Shop, which, along with Martin Chuzzlewit, stands as one of Dickens's humorous masterpieces. The Old Curiosity Shop is an astonishingly original work, with a unity of emotional mood exerting a pervasive influence. The novel is held together by an energetic interaction and blending of extremes; the modulations move from the pathetic to the grotesque, and, within this overall pattern, from the genial to the terrible grotesque mode. Unity comes, too, from the deployment of a series of images which derive from the central, opening, image, that of delirium and fever, through which the sounds of the real world are fitfully heard; and the modulating style of the

novel imitates the movements of a feverish vision. This inexplicably underrated novel is a major advance in Dickens's career, its humour marking the final development of his grotesque manner; and behind it are affinities with Hogarth and Hoffmann, and, more generally, with the modulating styles of Sterne and Carlyle.

In a perceptive page on the novel, Forster indicated a strange sense in which The Old Curiosity Shop is a unified work. Its unity comes from the prefiguring of the end in the beginning, as the image of Nell asleep among the lumber of the warehouse transforms itself into the final image of Nell asleep among the Gothic carvings of the church; and the transition from one kind of grotesque context to another is made by way of Quilp and his associated companions. Such a unity can be seen, even though the tale's ending was not known when it was begun:

Yet, from the opening of the tale to that undesigned ending; from the image of little Nell asleep amid the quaint grotesque figures of the old curiosity warehouse, to that other final sleep she takes among the grim forms and carvings of the old church aisle; the main purpose seems to be always present. The characters and incidents that at first appear most foreign to it, are found to have had with it a close relation. The hideous lumber and rottenness that surround the child in her grandfather's home, take shape again in Quilp and his filthy gang. In the first still picture of Nell's innocence in the midst of strange and alien forms, we have the forecast of her after-wanderings, her patient miseries, her sad maturity of experience before its time...And when, at last, Nell sits within the quiet old church where all her wanderings end, and gazes on

those silent monumental groups of warriors, with helmets, swords, and gauntlets wasting away around them; the associations among which her life had opened seem to have come crowding on the scene again, to be present at its close. But, stripped of their strangeness; deepened into solemn shapes by the suffering she has undergone; gently fusing every feeling of a life past into hopeful and familiar anticipation of a life to come; and already imperceptibly lifting her, without grief or pain, from the earth she loves, yet whose grosser paths her light steps only touched to show the track through them to Heaven. 18

The kind of unity which Forster ascribes to The Old Curiosity Shop is the kind of unity which Coleridge ascribed to the Hogarthian subject of the card-players; it is not a unity formed by contrast, but by the blending or fusing of disparate impressions, resulting in a third element, that of an emotional unity. Nell, in Dickens's novel, like the central female Hogarthian subject, has a purity and beauty which softens the effect of the 'humorous deformities' among which she is placed, creating the characteristic overall blending of pathos and humour. In the omitted part of the above quotation, Forster sees Nell's wanderings in terms of a series of Hogarthian scenes, mentioning particularly, in terms of the vocabulary of 'blending', the conception of the mending of the puppets in the graveyard:

Without the show-people and their blended fictions and realities, their waxworks, dwarfs, giants, and performing dogs, the picture would have wanted some part of its significance. Nor could the genius of Hogarth himself have given it higher expression than in the scenes by the cottage door, the furnace fire, and the burial place of the old church, over whose

tombs and gravestones hang the puppets of Mr Punch's show while the exhibitors are mending and repairing them.

As Forster suggests, the grotesque of this novel is not simply a means of creating and delineating character; like the irony of Vanity Fair, it is a medium in which the characters move, pervading the whole novel. This use of the grotesque has affinities with its use by a German writer, Hoffmann, whose terrifying conception of the mysterious and malevolent Coppelius in The Sand-Man reminds us of the description of Quilp in Dickens's novel; Coppelius is

a large, broad-shouldered man, with an immensely big head, a face the colour of yellow ochre, gray bushy eyebrows, from beneath which two piercing, greenish, cat-like eyes glittered, and a prominent Roman nose hanging over his upper lip. His distorted mouth was often screwed up into a malicious sneer; then two dark-red spots appeared on his cheeks, and a strange hissing noise proceeded from between his tightly clenched teeth. He always wore an ash-gray coat of an old-fashioned cut, a waistcoat of the same, and nether extremities to match, but black stockings and buckles set with stones on his shoes. His little wig scarcely extended beyond the crown of his head; his hair was curled round high above his big red ears, and plastered to his temples with cosmetic, and a broad closed hair-bag stood out prominently from his neck, so that you could see the silver buckle that fastened his folded neck-cloth. Altogether he was a most disagreeable and horribly ugly figure; but what we children detested most of all was his big coarse hairy hands; we could never fancy anything he had once touched...¹⁹

¹⁹ The Sand-Man (1817), The Best Tales of Hoffmann, edited by E.F.Bleiler, Dover Paperbacks (1967), pp. 186-7.

In another, more general, way, the energy of Dickens's method is Hogarthian. In a Hogarth picture, the canvas is crowded with figures, giving the impression of teeming life seen quickly before it passes on; it is this impression which Dickens wished to catch in his sketches of London life. By contrast, George Eliot, like a seventeenth century Dutch painter, will linger over depicting a scene which we can contemplate:

A sketch is a swift and unfinished thing, ...exhausting itself in its immediacy, an outburst of energy which snatches at its object rather than lovingly encompassing it; a scene, on the other hand, deeply studies and ingests its object, modelling it fully. The one follows the frenetic rhythm of the city, the other the tranquil rhythm of the country...²⁰

The Old Curiosity Shop can be seen, in this sense, as an extended sketch, exhibiting the modulating energy of 'Meditations in Monmouth Street' over the length of an entire novel; and the continuous activity of the prose which conveys the sketch has further affinities with the style of Sterne and of Carlyle. In Tristram Shandy, the style often mimics the content; just as, in the minds of the characters, one idea leads to another as a train of thought is set in motion, so the style of the novel itself wanders and modulates, sometimes slowly, sometimes at the helter-skelter pace of a horse-rider out of control:

²⁰ Peter Conrad, The Victorian Treasure-House, pp. 82-3.

What a rate I have gone on at, curvetting and frisking it away, two up and two down for four volumes together, without looking once behind, or even on one side of me, to see whom I trod upon! - I'll tread upon no one, - quoth I to myself when I mounted - I'll take a good rattling gallop; but I'll not hurt the poorest jack-ass upon the road - So off I set - up one lane - down another, through this turnpike - over that, as if the arch-jockey of jockeys had got behind me. 21

Sterne's style is partly an attempt, satirical and serious at once, to render the ways in which Locke's notions about the associations of ideas completely dominate the world of the novel, so that every event is subjected to the vagaries of chance; Carlyle's style in Sartor Resartus also modulates round one idea from which all others derive. Sterne's influence on Carlyle, and Carlyle's influence on Dickens and Thackeray, is mainly a matter of fashioning a style which is at once fluid and repetitive, restlessly shifting about while stating and transforming a small number of thematic ideas, in a precise parallel with the development of a chromatic musical style in the early nineteenth century. The main advantage of this style, in Sterne as well as Thackeray, in Carlyle as well as Dickens, is that transitions from one mood to another can be swiftly effected through the same thematic material; the same conception can be humorous and pathetic within the space of a single page. It is this style which Lamb admired in Shakespeare's blending of tragedy and comedy, and which Coleridge admired in Hogarth; and such a breaking down of barriers can

result in the grotesque mode, in music as well as literature.

In the case of Sartor Resartus, multiple repetitions of the same idea are often contained within the same paragraph, to give a driving urgency which is lacking in Sterne. The central contrast of the work, between the infinity of Nature and the finite character of Man, is stated in a typical paragraph, unadorned in the first sentence, then with growing complexity, as Carlyle modulates into an image comparing the minnow's knowledge of the oceans with Man's knowledge of Immensity; and the paragraph as a whole is itself a part of the ceaseless transitions woven on the loom of the work as a whole:

'System of Nature! To the wisest man, wide as is his vision, Nature remains of quite infinite depth, of quite infinite expansion; and all Experience thereof limits itself to some few computed centuries and measured square-miles. The course of Nature's phases, on this our little fraction of a Planet, is partially known to us: but who knows what deeper courses these depend on; what infinitely larger Cycle (of causes) our little Epicycle revolves on? To the Minnow every cranny and pebble, and quality and accident, of its little native Creek may have become familiar: but does the Minnow understand the Ocean Tides and periodic Currents, the Trade-winds, and Monsoons, and Moon's Eclipses; by all which the condition of its little Creek is regulated, and may, from time to time (unmiraculously enough), be quite overset and reversed? Such a Minnow is Man; his Creek this Planet Earth; his Ocean the immeasurable All; his Monsoons and periodic Currents the mysterious Course of Providence through Aeons of Aeons.' 22

In The French Revolution, too, style both describes and imitates reality; not the reality of the world as envisaged through the associationism of Locke, but reality as an amalgam of proto-positivism and Calvinistic determinism, a vision in which nothing is inactive. This sense of constant movement, seen in catastrophic terms in the recurring volcanic fire-images, is represented in the modulating treatment of the main motifs:

How true, that there is nothing dead in this Universe; that what we call dead is only changed, its forces working in inverse order! 'The leaf that lies rotting in moist winds,' says one, 'has still force; else how could it rot?' Our whole Universe is but an Infinite Complex of Forces; thousandfold, from Gravitation up to Thought and Will; man's Freedom environed with Necessity of Nature: in all which nothing at any moment slumbers, but all is for ever awake and busy. The thing that lies isolated inactive thou shalt nowhere discover; seek everywhere, from the granite mountain, slow-mouldering since Creation, to the passing cloud-vapour, to the living man; to the action, to the spoken word of man.... action...(is) an indestructible new element in the Infinite of Things. Or, indeed, what is this Infinite of Things itself, which men name Universe, but an Action, a sum-total of Actions and Activities?...

... human things wholly are in continual movement, and action and reaction; working continually forward, phasis after phasis, by unalterable laws, towards prescribed issues...How often must we say, and yet not rightly lay to heart: The seed that is sown, it will spring!...²³

The opening paragraphs of The Old Curiosity Shop present the main thematic motifs of the novel. The city, with its restless crowds, is contrasted

²³ The French Revolution (1837), Works, vol. 3, Book 3, Ch. 1, pp. 102-3.

with the idyllic peace of the country, and images of imprisonment blend into images of freedom; and in the 'speculations' on city life of paragraph three, the alert, inquiring attention of Boz has become a fevered nightmare, in which the sounds of the 'incessant tread of feet' are rendered through the mind of a sick man in a state of uncontrolled fever:

all/

Think of a sick man in such a place as Saint Martin's Court, listening to the footsteps, and in the midst of pain and weariness obliged, despite himself (as though it were a task he must perform) to detect the child's step from the man's, the slipshod beggar from the booted exquisite, the lounging from the busy, the dull heel of the sauntering outcast from the quick tread of an expectant pleasure-seeker - think of the hum and noise being always present to his senses, and of the stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on, through his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie dead but conscious, in a noisy churchyard, and had no hope of rest for centuries to come. 24

In the action of the novel, that the tread of footsteps should go on for ever becomes a possibility, as Nell and her grandfather wander aimlessly on through the countryside and the furnace-lined streets of the industrial Midlands, meeting giants, dwarfs, furnace-keepers, performing dogs, and waxworks, in an ever-changing phantasmagoria. No less terrifying are the delirious landscapes of the mind; Nell's grandfather's mania for gambling is a form of fever which becomes part of Nell's mind also. But even more terrifying than her grandfather's

²⁴ The Old Curiosity Shop (1841, Penguin English Library Edition, 1972), Ch.1, p.43.

crazed dreams of wealth, or the Hell-like furnaces, is the figure of Quilp himself, who becomes, extensively, a part of Nell's mental landscape as Fagin, briefly, became part of Oliver's. As she sleeps among the waxworks, she imagines that Quilp is actually among them; and in another grotesque juxtaposition, when she meets him accidentally in an old town, she thinks that he has stepped down from an empty niche once occupied by a stone statue, 'showing in the moonlight like some monstrous image that had come down from its niche and was casting a backward glance at its old house' (Ch.27, p.276).

Quilp is indeed the presiding nightmare in the perpetual dream-world of the novel, a grotesque hardly-human figure, in whom humour and horror inextricably blend. His tremendous energy is a constant assertion of will; a method of revenge upon a world which recoils in horror at his appearance, a reaction which he deliberately provokes in order to dominate others. Like Fagin's, his is the energy of a demon or a goblin, whether he is eating his breakfast: 'he ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with the heads and tails on' (Ch.5, p.86): taunting a dog with hideous faces, or striking a wooden figure-head which is carved in the likeness of Kit; and if he is part of Nell's terrified imagination, she is part of his sexual fantasy, as he looks forward to the death of his wife and his marriage to Nell, who would become ' "my

little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife" '. His meditations on this possibility to the old man demonstrate Quilp's linguistic virtuosity, a feature by which he causes our moral faculties to be suspended as the delights of an anarchic imagination take over:

'Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud, neighbour,' said Quilp, nursing his short leg, and making his eyes twinkle very much; 'such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell!'

'She's so,' said Quilp, speaking very slowly, and feigning to be quite absorbed in the subject, 'so small, so compact, so beautifully modelled, so fair, with such blue veins and such a transparent skin, and such little feet, and such winning ways - but bless me, you're nervous. Why, neighbour, what's the matter?' (Ch.9, p.125)

Despite the sadism of much of Quilp's behaviour, much of his humour has a subversive attractiveness, and he gains our sympathy in some parts of the novel. As in his treatment of Buzfuz and Fagin, Dickens often identifies with what he fears through humour; deeply as he was emotionally committed to the values represented by Kit and the Garlands, Dickens joins Quilp in his energetic attacks on their sentimental benevolism, as when he assures Mrs Nubbles about the baby's safety:

'Don't be frightened, mistress,' said Quilp, after a pause. 'Your son knows me; I don't eat babies; I don't like 'em. It will be as well to stop that young screamer though, in case I should be tempted to do him a mischief. Holloa, sir! Will you be quiet?' (Ch.21, p.223)

And when, confronted with Nell's caged bird by Kit, who asks what is to be done with it, Quilp snarls, ' "Wring its neck" ' (Ch.13, p.161), and forces Kit to fight another boy for its possession. Quilp, too, is the tormentor of Brass, whose hypocrisy he despises. To our delight, Brass maintains his front of pretence, even when Quilp forces him to drink boiling liquid out of a saucepan:

The wretched Sampson took a few short sips of the liquor, which immediately distilled itself into burning tears, and in that form came rolling down his cheeks into the pipkin again, turning the colour of his face and eyelids to a deep red, and giving rise to a violent fit of coughing, in the midst of which he was still heard to declare, with the constancy of a martyr, that it was 'beautiful indeed!' (Ch.62, p.568)

Quilp's finest moment, in which he gains our most wholehearted approval, is when he appears before Brass, Mrs Jiniwin, and Mrs Quilp, who, believing him to be dead, are taking an inventory of his possessions. Once again, the discomfiture of Brass, a Bergsonian comic character who never fails to fall into an automatic reflex of hypocrisy, even on Quilp's reappearance, is one reason why we share Quilp's triumphant reassertion of his energy; but, even more powerfully, this reassertion is against death itself, in a parody of a resurrection motif, with Brass as the representative of the thanatoid element. As he sits in mourning, drinking Quilp's

rum, Brass muses on the clothes and character of the departed, which become strangely mixed:

"His coat, his waistcoat, his shoes and stockings, his trousers, his hat, his wit and humour, his pathos and his umbrella, all come before me like visions of my youth" (Ch.49, p.460).

Quilp is a powerfully ambiguous character, monstrous and appealing, human and demonic; his malice is, in the circumstances, almost reasonable, and he mainly confines himself to hurting those who enjoy it. His ambiguity is that of the grotesque mode itself, a mode which dominates the novel and which is the basis of its humour. This mode is immediately established in Chapter 1, not only through images of delirium, but through images of darkness fitfully illuminated, a chiaroscuro effect which is picked up again when Nell's wanderings begin. Master Humphrey prefers to walk by night, since at that time there is a 'greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets...a glimpse of passing faces caught by the light of a street lamp or a shop window is often better for my purpose than their full revelation by daylight' (Ch.1, p.43), and the contrasting uses of fires in the novel continue this idea of things seen in shadow, either in a context of warm, if grotesque, conviviality, as in the 'Jolly Sandboys' inn, or in the terrifying context of the furnaces, the torchlight procession, and riot of the Midlands. Perhaps the

most terrifying ambiguity of all which the grotesque mode embodies is expressed in the collection of waxworks exhibited by Mrs Jarley. They are mainly representations of grotesque murderers, or dwarfs, or enormously fat men; and although Mrs Jarley sees them as "calm and classical" (Ch.27, pp.271-2), by contrast to the violence of the low Punch show, it is this very calmness which gives them their peculiar terror. Like Hoffmann's automata, they have the intensity of life without its energy; and their frozen frenzy causes Nell to recoil in terror:

there were so many of them with their great glassy eyes - and, as they stood one behind the other all about her bed, they looked so like living creatures, and yet so unlike in their grim stillness and silence, that she had a kind of terror of them for their own sakes, and would often lie watching their dusky figures until she was obliged to rise and light a candle, or go and sit at the open window and feel a companionship in the bright stars. (Ch.29, p.289).

To this horror is added the feeling that Quilp is among the waxworks; and the notion of this kind of continuity of the grotesque, of Quilp's intensity without his energy, is even more horrible than Quilp in the flesh. The motifs of the fever, the fires, and the waxworks all contribute to the kind of unity in the novel at which Forster was hinting: the multiple embodiment of the grotesque principle, in things as well as people, as the context in which Nell is placed.

But in opposition to the various forms of the grotesque of terror is placed the genial, reassuring grotesque of Dick Swiveller, who, like Quilp, invents his own version of reality through flights of linguistic fancy. But in Dick's case, it is a genially idealised reality, arising out of a creative, not a destructive, egotism, like that of Mr Micawber, in which gin-and-water becomes rosy wine, and his single room is converted to a set of apartments in a 'flight of fancy' which conveys to his hearers 'a notion of indefinite space...long suites of lofty halls' (Ch.7, p.101). Like Micawber, his defiance of sordid reality involves a permanent state of debt; he keeps a book in which he writes down the names of all the streets occupied by people to whom he owes money, so that he can avoid them. His triumph over Sophy Wackles, who has accepted the favours of another, a market gardener called Cheggs, is a linguistic trick, a matter of a delicately placed indefinite article: on Sophy's apologising, Dick retorts, '"Sorry, ma'am...sorry in the possession of a Cheggs! "' (Ch.8, p.118).

It is in his developing relationship with the nameless female drudge who lives in the Brass's cellar that Dick's genial goodness of heart is fully revealed. Kept like a half-starved animal in her filthy dungeon (the scene where she is fed by Sally shows Dickens pushing macabre humour to its limit), she watches Dick through the keyhole as he plays

cards; becoming aware of her, he descends to the cellar and teaches her how to play, christening her 'the Marchioness'. To the Brasses, she has no name, and hardly any identity, as she tells Quilp:

'Where do you come from?' he said after a long pause, stroking his chin.
 'I don't know.'
 'What's your name?'
 'Nothing.'
 'Nonsense!' retorted Quilp. 'What does your mistress call you when she wants you?'
 'A little devil,' said the child. (Ch.51, p.474)

Dick's care is rewarded when the Marchioness nurses him through a nearly fatal illness; and her account of her life with the Brasses, which she reveals after he has recovered, demonstrates the very survival of the spirit through 'flights of fancy':

'They kept me very short,' said the small servant. 'Oh! you can't think how short they kept me. So I used to come out at night after they'd gone to bed, and feel about in the dark for bits of biscuit, or sangwitches that you'd left in the office, or even pieces of orange peel to put into cold water and make believe it was wine. Did you ever taste orange peel and water?' (Ch.64, p.587)

This humorous blending of horror and pathos is perhaps Dickens's greatest assertion of the power and the value of 'fanciful treatment' to cope with a world which is often threatening and hostile; and such humorous transformations are at their most extended in his humorous masterpiece, Martin Chuzzlewit.

Martin Chuzzlewit is the greatest example of the generosity of Dickens's humorous imagination. Such is the linguistic exuberance and ebullience, so unstoppably overwhelming is the power, of the humorous invention, that the reality it depicts is almost totally transformed into astonishing forms, as it often completely sweeps aside Dickens's own didactic directions. Much as he hates the hypocrisy of the Americans, Tigg, and Pecksniff, his astonishment at what they do to the English language takes precedence over any Fieldingesque interest in simply holding them up as awful examples; they are exempt from our ultimate judgement. In this novel, Dickens bestows his own linguistic inventiveness upon his characters, whose eulogies upon each other proliferate through the novel, as if the characters themselves must invent their fellow-characters, in a parallel to the original creative process: Tom's praise of Pecksniff, Tigg's of Slyme, Sweedlepipe's of Bailey, the Americans' of every other American, and Mrs Harris's of Mrs Gamp (where a character invents, for the purpose of self-praise, another character), show Dickens's creative fertility feeding off itself in a kind of love-affair with the language.

This humorous invention appears, at its simplest level, in the innumerable baroque flourishes of the

narrator, as the tiniest aspect of reality, or the most minor character, are filled with an abundant humorous life. Mr Pecksniff's hypocrisy is conveyed in a series of images which suggest its constant activity, images which show the same kind of loving reanimation of clichés which Pecksniff himself goes in for. He warms his hands before the fire 'as benevolently as if they were somebody's'; when talking to old Martin he is caught 'keeping his hand in his waistcoat as though he were ready, on the shortest notice, to produce his heart for Martin Chuzzlewit's inspection'; and a stock image is given new life in the description of Pecksniff's general manner:

It would be no description of Mr Pecksniff's gentleness of manner to adopt the common parlance, and say that he looked at this moment as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. He rather looked as if any quantity of butter might have been made out of him, by churning the milk of human kindness, as it spouted upwards from his heart. 25

In the description of the offices of the Anglo-Bengalee, Dickens performs a brilliant variation on his trick of describing someone in terms of their clothes, a grotesque conception which was at work in his early sketch 'Meditations in Monmouth Street'. In this case, the image evokes the impression of security which is given out by the offices of the Company as a whole: 'The chairman having taken his seat with great solemnity, the secretary supported

²⁵ Martin Chuzzlewit, Ch.3, pp.85, 89, 90-1.

him on his right hand, and the porter stood bolt upright behind them, forming a warm background of waistcoat'. This image is even more brilliantly used in the description of Jobling, the medical adviser, who had 'a portentously sagacious chin, and a pompous voice, with a rich huskiness in some of its tones that went directly to the heart, like a ray of light shining through the ruddy medium of choice old burgundy.' (Ch.27, pp.502, 505).

On a minor character, the ancient female servant who replaces Bailey at Todgers', and who appears for only one paragraph, the same kind of attention is bestowed as is given in the creation of a major character: 'She was a perfect Tomb for messages and small parcels; and when dispatched to the Post Office with letters, had been frequently seen endeavouring to insinuate them into casual chinks in private doors, under the delusion that any door with a hole in it would answer the purpose.' (Ch.32,p.578)

Mrs Gamp's desire for custom is conveyed in an image of typical extravagance: 'Mrs Gamp was a lady of that happy temperament which can be ecstatic without any other stimulating cause than a general desire to establish a large and profitable connexion. She added daily so many strings to her bow, that she made a perfect harp of it; and upon that instrument she now began to perform an extemporaneous concerto'. (Ch.46, p.780)

All the energy of Jonson and Hogarth is present in the dazzling description of the assembled Chuzzlewit family; the evocation of key external details, as in Jonson or Hogarth, suggests vividly the quality of the moral life inside:

First, there was Mr Spottletoe, who was so bald and had such big whiskers, that he seemed to have stopped his hair, by the sudden application of some powerful remedy, in the very act of falling off his head, and to have fastened it irrevocably on his face. Then there was Mrs Spottletoe, who being much too slim for her years, and of a poetical constitution, was accustomed to inform her more intimate friends that the said whiskers were 'the lodestar of her existence'; and who could now, by reason of her strong affection for her uncle Chuzzlewit, and the shock it gave her to be suspected of testamentary designs upon him, do nothing but cry - except moan. Then there were Anthony Chuzzlewit, and his son Jonas: the face of the old man so sharpened by the wariness and cunning of his life, that it seemed to cut him a passage through the crowded room, as he edged away behind the remotest chairs; while the son had so well profited by the precept and example of the father, that he looked a year or two the elder of the twain, as they stood winking their red eyes, side by side, and whispering to each other softly. Then there was the widow of a deceased brother of Mr Martin Chuzzlewit, who being almost supernaturally disagreeable, and having a dreary face and a bony figure and a masculine voice, was, in right of these qualities, what is commonly called a strong-minded woman; and who, if she could, would have established her claim to the title, and have shown herself, mentally speaking, a perfect Samson, by shutting up her brother-in-law in a private mad-house, until he proved his complete sanity by loving her very much. Beside her sat her spinster daughters, three in number, and of gentlemanly deportment, who had so mortified themselves with tight stays, that their tempers were reduced to something less than their waists, and sharp lacing was expressed in their very noses...(Ch.4,p.107)

There is, however, one area in the novel in

which the moral dimension is not undermined by delight at the grotesque distortions set up for our condemnation: the treatment of Tom Pinch. The tone of hushed reverence with which Tom is described can be seen when this epitome of simplicity of heart is described soulfully playing the organ; the flatness and vagueness of this kind of writing, contrasting sharply with the frenzied, precise activity of the rest of the novel's linguistic flights, warn us not to disturb the solemn, hushed atmosphere, vaguely evoked and throbbing with emotion:

As the grand tones resounded through the church, they seemed, to Tom, to find an echo in the depth of every ancient tomb, no less than in the deep mystery of his own heart. Great thoughts and hopes came crowding on his mind as the rich music rolled upon the air, and yet among them - something more grave and solemn in their purpose, but the same - were all the images of that day, down to its very lightest recollection of childhood. The feeling that the sounds awakened, in the moment of their existence, seemed to include his whole life and being; and as the surrounding realities of stone and wood and glass grew dimmer in the darkness, these visions grew so much the brighter that Tom might have forgotten the new pupil and the expectant master, and have sat there pouring out his grateful heart till midnight, but for a very earthy old verger insisting on locking up the cathedral forthwith. (Ch. 5, pp. 126-7)

Tom Pinch marks the final development of the kind of humorous character who, beginning with Don Quixote himself, represents the values of the moral tendency of humour, as they were modified in the eighteenth century. The combination of innocence

and idealism in Quixote reappeared in Parson Adams, in whom the idealism had become a latitudinarian Christianity; but the force of this combination was reduced by Sterne in Toby Shandy, where innocence is blended not with idealism but with a compulsive benevolence, evoking pathos. In Dominie Sampson, innocence was combined with the kind of social awkwardness which guaranteed a simple heart and natural feelings; and it is this combination which Dickens adopted for characters such as Noggs and Pinch himself, and extended the idea further, in the mixture of innocence and actual idiocy in Mr Dick, who resembles Scott's Davie Gellatley, but without the shrewdness. When Tom is deceived by worldly qualities, he does not assume a mask of misanthropy, but is extolled, by Dickens, for his innocence and trustfulness of spirit, which are contrasted with the 'wisdom' of selfishness and cunning:

Tom, Tom! The man in all this world most confident in his sagacity and shrewdness; the man in all this world most proud of his distrust of other men, and having most to show in gold and silver as the gains belonging to his creed; the meekest favourer of that wise doctrine, Every man for himself, and God for us all (there being high wisdom in the thought that the Eternal Majesty of Heaven ever was, or can be, on his side of selfish lust and love!); shall never find, oh, never find, be sure of that, the time come home to him, when all his wisdom is an idiot's folly, weighed against a simple heart! (Ch.39,p.692)

But it is not the moral, Quixotic humorous tradition which predominates in Martin Chuzzlewit,

but rather a Falstaffian, transforming process of humorous invention, even when the humorous weapon is turned in the direction of a satirical target. Clearly, Dickens intended to attack the Americans' obsession with dollars, the behaviour of their yellow press, their violence of behaviour, their rudeness, and their constant self-praise; and in expounding his satirical message, he uses the obvious devices of direct exhortation and Jonsonian allegory, as in the description of the literally two-faced Scadder, who organises the Eden deal. But Dickens was also fascinated by what the Americans did to the language; their exaggerations and curious distortions of English, like the rhetoric of Buzfuz, give him the opportunity for the kinds of impersonations which lie at the heart of his humorous methods. The exaggerations of the Transcendentalists were one such opportunity, for parody:

'Mind and matter,' said the lady in the wig, 'glide swift into the vortex of immensity. Howls the sublime, and softly sleeps the calm Ideal, in the whispering chambers of Imagination. To hear it, sweet it is. But then, outlaughs the stern philosopher, and saith to the Grotesque, "What ho! arrest for me that Agency. Go, bring it here!" And so the vision fadeth! (Ch. 34, p. 615)

Dickens sees America as a gigantic swindle; as an informal national conspiracy to promote deceit and hypocrisy. Behind the show there is no substance, and behind the sounds of the words there is no meaning. Just as there is a board-room at the Anglo-Bengalee, but no assets, so there is a

map of Eden, but no such place exists; and just as Mr Pecksniff uses words for their sound and not their meaning, so the hyperbolic orotundity of American usage is a facade covering a void. But Dickens's interest is not so much in making a moral point about hypocrisy in the American, the Tigg, and the Pecksniff areas of the book; he is rather concerned with the ways in which language humorously enacts such a spiritual state, in America emerging in the ways in which constant eulogy strains language to its limits; Chollop (a sort of homicidal Davy Crockett) is, according to Pogram,

'a model of a man, quite fresh from Natur's mould!...He is a true-born child of this free hemisphere! Verdant as the mountains of our country; bright and flowing as our mineral Licks; unspiled by withering conventionalities as air our broad and boundless Perearers! Rough he may be. So air our Barrs. Wild he may be. So air our Buffalers. But he is a child of Natur', and a child of Freedom; and his boastful answer to the Despot and the Tyrant is, that his bright home is in the Settin Sun.' (Ch.34,p.606)

In his treatment of the Americans, the desire to expose and the urge to impersonate vie with each other in Dickens's mind, a tension which frequently operates when his humorous imagination is at full stretch. This tendency is supremely present in the treatment of the figure of Pecksniff, a hypocrite of Tartuffian proportions, who, as Anthony Chuzzlewit acutely observes, actually believes his own professions of openness and honesty.

Pecksniff, like the Americans, is subjected to routine satirical attacks and exhortations; and he is seen as a monster of evil in his most despicable act in the whole novel, when he attempts to seduce and blackmail Mary Graham in Chapter 30. But the scene is a failure, since, when he is required to display his hypocrisy in action, Pecksniff is unconvincing; it is when his hypocrisy is enacted through language that he is most successful. The language he uses in the Mary Graham scene is flat, the language of the ordinary villainous seducer; but the language he uses elsewhere, like the images which Dickens used to describe him on his first appearance, perfectly embodies his nature. Like Brass in The Old Curiosity Shop, he is basically a Bergsonian comic character, in the sense that his reactions to everything involve an automatic recourse to a hypocritical stance; but these reactions, even more than Brass's, involve the kinds of reanimation and extension of cliché which Dickens used in the image of churning butter. The more pressure which is put on him, the more elaborate do his verbal excesses become, as conceit is piled on conceit in a constant assertion of innocence. In his compulsive desire to convince the world that he is a good man, Pecksniff will extend a pious cliché, ramming home the point with ludicrous and self-betraying force, as when he apostrophises Thomas Pinch:

... 'years have passed, I think, since Thomas Pinch and I first walked the world together!'.
 'And Thomas Pinch and I,' said Mr Pecksniff,

in a deeper voice, 'will walk it yet, in mutual faithfulness and friendship! And if it comes to pass that either of us be run over, in any of those busy crossings which divide the streets of life, the other will convey him to the hospital in Hope, and sit beside his bed in Bounty!' (Ch.5,p.135)

In his eulogy on his processes of digestion, Pecksniff again manages to talk about himself as if he were someone else; and Dickens once again makes the very limited figure of the hypocrite into an occasion for delicate comic invention:

'The process of digestion, as I have been informed by anatomical friends, is one of the most wonderful works of nature. I do not know how it may be with others, but it is a great satisfaction to me to know, when regaling on my humble fare, that I am putting in motion the most beautiful machinery with which we have any acquaintance. I really feel at such times as if I was doing a public service. When I have wound myself up, if I may employ such a term,' said Mr Pecksniff with exquisite tenderness, 'and know that I am Going, I feel that in the lesson afforded by the works within me, I am a Benefactor to my Kind!' (Ch.8,p.179)

When he is drunk at Todgers' boarding house, the essential Pecksniff asserts itself through the maudlin, rambling nature of his observations, as quotations from Doctor Watts mingle strangely with references to his advertisement of an architectural education:

'My friends,' cried Mr Pecksniff, looking over the banisters, 'let us improve our minds by mutual enquiry and discussion. Let us be moral. Let us contemplate existence. Where

is Jenkins?'

'Here,' cried that gentleman. 'Go to bed again!'

'To bed!' said Mr Pecksniff. 'Bed! 'Tis the voice of the sluggard, I hear him complain, you have woke me too soon, I must slumber again. If any young orphan will repeat the remainder of that simple piece from Doctor Watts's collection an eligible opportunity now offers.' (Ch.9,p.211)

Pecksniff sees himself as the one true and constant individual in a world of self-seeking, protecting the weak against their opponents ('"You may bestride my senseless corse, sir"', he tells young Martin, while protecting old Chuzzlewit, '"That is very likely"' (Ch.43,p.746)); and when he is at his most rapacious, his modes of address become more elaborate. After plotting with Montague, he addresses the stars on the vanity of men's pursuits (Ch.44,p.760), and when he is finally dismissed by old Chuzzlewit, he forgives him, referring eloquently to the silent tomb (Ch.52, p.891). It is by his language that Pecksniff is betrayed; the more he pursues his stale figures of speech, the more patently hypocritical he appears.

It is not so much by words, but by actions, that Bailey junior creates his own reality. He can be compared, in the extent of his power over the external world, to Swiveller and Micawber; but Bailey mimics, rather than linguistically conjures up, exaggerated visions. He puzzles and delights by his extraordinary behaviour, which is sustained at a constant level of feverish invention. He entertains the lodgers of

Todgers' boarding house 'by thrusting the lighted candle ^{into} his mouth, and exhibiting his face in a state of transparency' (Ch.9,p.200); when he is told by the Miss Pecksniffs that he will be reported to Mrs Todgers for dancing a hornpipe, 'having expressed the bitterness of his contrition by affecting to wipe away scalding tears with his apron...(he feigned) to wring a vast amount of water from that garment' (Ch.11,p.231); and in the process of driving Tigg's carriage, a job he acquires after he leaves Todgers', he would go round St James's Square at a hand gallop, 'coming slowly into Pall Mall by another entry, as if, in the interval, his pace had been a perfect crawl' (Ch.27,p.496). He is not only witty in himself, but is the cause of wit in others; although his real name is supposed to be Benjamin, he is called a variety of names by the lodgers, who find a scope for their own inventive powers in contemplating his antics; his present name of Bailey junior derives from a ballad about a young lady who perished by her own hand at an early age. But in his full splendour as Tigg's carriage attendant, a post which he relishes for its horsey associations, he finds his finest incarnation; in such a role he becomes

a highly-condensed embodiment of all the sporting grooms in London; an abstract of all the stable-knowledge of the time; a something at a high-pressure that must have had existence for many years, and was fraught with terrible experiences. And truly, though in the cloudy atmosphere of

Todgers's Mr Bailey's genius had ever shone out brightly in this particular respect, it now eclipsed both time and space, cheated beholders of their senses, and worked on their belief in defiance of all natural laws. He walked along the tangible and real stones of Holborn Hill, an undersized boy; and yet he winked the winks, and thought the thoughts, and did the deeds, and said the sayings of an ancient man. There was an old principle within him, and a young surface without. (Ch.26, pp.489-90)

Bailey continues to cheat the senses; thought to be dead after a carriage accident, and mourned by his admirer Poll Sweedlepipe ("...what a Life Young Bailey's was!" (Ch.49, p.828)), he reappears, as if from the dead, shaken up but alive (Ch.52, p.893). Such resilience is part of his character; it is the kind of resilience which is suggested, too, in Swiveller and Micawber, and in the humorous triumph of the novel, Mrs Gamp.

Mrs Gamp is a selfish old woman, a nurse by profession, who is rather too much addicted to gin. She presides at the ends of life, and her two subjects of conversation are birth and death; to assist her in her observations she has invented a friend, Mrs Harris, whose function is to testify to the good nature of Mrs Gamp herself. The language used by Mrs Gamp is a medium of extraordinary density, compounded of a demotic Cockney and the effects of imbibing frequent draughts of gin; and the room in which she lives takes on the bewildering confusion of its owner. She is apt to recall incidents in her

past life which involved her family and her husband, the late Mr Gamp, who had a wooden leg, which he once tried to sell for drink:

'although the blessing of a daughter was deniged me; which, if we had had one, Gamp would certainly have drunk its little shoes right off its feet, as with our precious boy he did, and arterwards sent the child a errand to sell his wooden leg for any money it would fetch as matches in the rough, and bring it home in liquor: which was trully done beyond his years, for ev'ry individle penny that child lost at toss or buy for kidney ones; and come home arterwards quite bold, to break the news, and offering to drown himself if that would be a satisfaction to his parents.' (Ch.25,p.472)

Mrs Gamp recounts the appalling events of her life, including the deaths of her children and husband, mainly as she reported these to Mrs Harris, in a language which often contains distorted references to Biblical texts ('" this wale of life"'), and which suggests a kind of buoyancy of spirit, like Micawber's, which can survive the blows of fate and transform disaster through the kind of utterance which, in its mixture of terror and humour, contacts basic experiences:

"No, Mrs Harris," I says to her, "ex-cuge me, if you please. My own," I says, "has fallen out of three-pair backs, and had damp doorsteps settled on their lungs, and one was turned up smilin' in a bedstead, unbeknown"...And as to husbands, there's a wooden leg gone likeways home to its account, which in its constancy of walkin' into wine vaults, and never comin' out again 'till fetched by force, was quite as weak as flesh, if not weaker.'

Mrs Gamp is an expert on the misfortunes which sometimes attend the processes of birth, and is vociferous against railway-engines, which often cause this event to take place prematurely:

'I have heerd of one young man, a guard upon a railway, only three years opened - well does Mrs Harris know him, which indeed he is her own relation by her sister's marriage with a master sawyer - as is godfather at this present time to six-and-twenty blessed little strangers, equally unexpected, and all on 'um named after the Ingeins as was the cause.'
(Ch. 40, pp. 700-1)

Mrs Gamp creates her own, intense, version of reality, to indicate the strangeness of reality itself. Her accounts of the fundamental processes of birth and death filter through a series of bizarre images and disconnected ideas: railway engines, barrel organs, Biblical texts, wooden legs, owls, and Punch shows drift by in a phantasmagoria, demonstrating the basic absurdity of existence. Not only the spectacular intervention of a railway train disturbs the processes of nature; the smallest accident is sufficient to upset the firmest prediction. Of a regular customer, Mrs Gamp remarks,

"Is it likely, ma'am," I says, "as she will fail this once?" Says Mrs Harris, "No, ma'am, not in the course of nater. But," she says, the tears a-fillin in her eyes, "you knows much betterer than me, with your experienge, how little puts us out. A Punch's show," she says, "a chimbley sweep, a newfundlandog, or a drunkin man a-comin round the corner sharp, may do it". So it may, Mr Sweedepipes," said

Mrs Gamp, 'there's no deniging of it; and though my books is clear for a full week, I takes a anxious art along with me, I do assure you, sir.' (Ch.29,p.533)

Mrs Gamp does not tell absurd stories about life, in the manner of Sam Weller or Jingle; for her, life itself is absurd, with contingency at its heart. The contingency of life is both its essence and the justification for her invention of Mrs Harris, who, like Dickens's own invention of Mrs Gamp, both indicates and accommodates that contingency. Of the accidents of life, Mrs Gamp retains a stoical acceptance, a Biblical recognition of the consequences of existence itself; on hearing of the death of Bailey junior, she remarks of that young man that '"He was born into a wale...and he lived in a wale; and he must take the consequences of sech a sitiuation"' (Ch.49,p.828). But within this attitude, Mrs Gamp represents the assurance that the ordering of contingency can give, through the processes of invention; in her remarks there is a continual tension between the horror of events such as the deaths of children, and their transformation by the imagination to render them tolerable. One such transformation was the cause of a shocking experience of Mrs Harris when she saw what had happened to her sister's baby, exhibited in a bottle at a fair:

'Which, Mr Chuzzlewit,' she said, 'is well beknown to Mrs Harris as has one sweet infant (though she do not wish it known) in her own

family by the mother's side, kep in spirits in a bottle; and that sweet babe she see at Greenwich Fair, a-travelling in company with the pink-eyed lady, Prooshan dwarf, and livin' skelinton, which judge her feelins when the barrel organ played, and she was showed her own dear sister's child, the same not bein' expected from the outside picter, where it was painted quite contrairy in a livin' state, a many sizes larger, and performing beautiful upon the Arp, which never did that dear child know or do: since breathe it never did, to speak on, in this wale!" (Ch.52,pp.893-4)

The most tremendous event in the novel is not the murder of Tigg by Jonas, but the denial of Mrs Harris's existence by Betsey Prig, a brutal denial of the assurance that invention can give us in a world of absurd contingency. And the protective imagination out of which Mrs Gamp created her creature is a type of Dickens's own humorous imagination, in all its Shakespearean prodigality.

7

Of all Dickens's humorous characters, the Micawbers are the most Falstaffian in conception; and like Falstaff, they inhabit a world which has no room for them. Just as Falstaff cannot survive the pressure of the Realpolitik of the politicians' world, so the Micawbers represent a child-like innocence which cannot survive in a seriously adult world. In a novel which emphasises the virtues of hard work, respectability, prudence, and the bourgeois virtue of paying one's debts, the shiftlessness, the shabby gentility, the fecundity, and the reckless

disregard for the realities of finance of the Micawbers have no place. On the other hand, their virtues, of loyalty and resilient optimism, are rather incongruous too; and they have a special place in David's, and Dickens's, heart. Only the Micawbers rendered David's childhood tolerable; and it was Mrs Micawber whom David saw as a substitute for a mother. The importuning of the debt-collectors, drawn from a painful part of Dickens's own experience, is dealt with through the typical resilience of the Micawbers; as they call out, Mr Micawber

would be transported with grief and mortification, even to the length (as I was once made aware by a scream from his wife) of making motions at himself with a razor; but within half an hour afterwards, he would polish up his shoes with extraordinary pains, and go out, humming a tune with a greater air of gentility than ever, 26

and when he is taken to the King's Bench prison, he reveals the same manic-depressive tendencies: 'He told me, as he went out of the house, that the God of day had now gone down upon him - and I really thought his heart was broken and mine too. But I heard, afterwards, that he was seen to play a lively game at skittles, before noon' (Ch.11,p.221). Micawber's embellishments of reality, like those of Falstaff in his account of the events on Gadshill, proceed from a genial, good-hearted nature; he is kind to David when David is a child (and never borrows money off him), and one of his kindest acts when David

is married is to rescue David and Dora from the embarrassing consequences of a disastrous meal, by re-cooking the meat in an atmosphere of genial and bustling enjoyment. And in these embellishments of reality, Micawber reveals a linguistic resource which goes beyond even Dick Swiveller's in its range and breadth of reference; his speeches and letters are masterpieces of self-delighting rhetoric, graced by an occasional literary flourish. In his letter announcing his move to Canterbury, he tells David, "Our ashes, at a future period, will probably be found commingled in the cemetery attached to a venerable pile, for which the spot to which I refer, has acquired a reputation, shall I say from China to Peru?" (Ch.36,p.592); on the occasion when he meets Mr Dick, he comments feelingly that "It has been my lot...to meet, in the diversified panorama of human existence, with an occasional oasis, but never with one so green, so gushing, as the present" (Ch.49,p.777); and, in her magisterial review of her husband's career, Mrs Micawber selects the professions of corn and coals, and brewing and banking, as much for their alliterative attractiveness as their appropriateness.

The Micawbers represent a kind of final holiday of Dickens's humorous imagination, and, in their context, their effect is shown to be severely limited by their close association with David's childhood. In the total context of Dickens's work,

they assume an even more valedictory appearance; such comic resilience and control of the world though the humorous imagination never again, after David Copperfield, make their impact felt. The humorous characters do not take over the novels after 1850, as they took over The Old Curiosity Shop and Martin Chuzzlewit. In the novels of the second half of the career, humour does what it can to indicate the kinds of social pressures against which the individual must struggle. It narrows down, creating the grotesque conceptions of Mrs F's Aunt or Silas Wegg, where the macabre realisation has a bite which deprives it of any geniality, or outlining the despairing ramifications of the Circumlocution Office. Humour is no longer capable of providing the 'fanciful treatment' which, in the first half of his career, Dickens saw as his central imaginative gift.

Instead, humour leads us, finally, into the death-haunted landscapes of Our Mutual Friend, where we meet again a wooden leg and a baby preserved in a bottle, not at a fair but in the shop of Mr Venus, taxidermist and articulator of bones, when Mr Wegg, shortly to rise in society, calls to buy back his amputated leg which Venus had bought in a job lot from the hospital, and which is still somewhere in the yard. Wegg explains: "I have a prospect of getting on in life, and elevating myself by my own independent exertions...and I shouldn't like - I tell

you openly I should not like - under such circumstances, to be what I may call dispersed, a part of me here, and a part of me there, but should wish to collect myself like a genteel person".²⁷ The grotesque mode does not, in this novel, assert the triumph of the spirit, but rather dwells on its defeat, in analysing a society in which the urge to gentility is seen as a deathly condition. Wegg is merely one bizarre embodiment of such a social condition, a condition in which the personality is fragmented to macabre proportions; he continually speaks of his missing member as 'I', parodying the once life-enhancing animation of the inanimate by seeing a part of himself as portable property. To such deracination of the soul do social conditions lead; and the only, and final, task of grotesque humour is to wearily record such a process.

²⁷ Our Mutual Friend (1865, Penguin English Library Edition 1971), Book the First, Ch.7, p.127.

CONCLUSION. THE REJECTION OF HUMOUR: SCENES OF
CLERICAL LIFE

1

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Romantic humorous sensibility had reached the end of a complex development, in which two main features, embodied in the writing of the two greatest humorists of the time, can be broadly discerned.

The transcendental humour of Sartor Resartus had affirmed, in terms of a metaphysical thesis, that the flame of man's moral and spiritual greatness still burned; but Dickens, in developing the capacity of humour to transform reality, encouraged the overwhelming of the processes of ordinary moral judgement by the processes of delighted wonder as the alternative to reality was contemplated. Dickens's humorous methods had also told psychological truths which were beyond the ordinary processes of analysis to reveal; but to opponents of Dickens's imaginative methods, his humorous excursions seemed like dodging the problems of a form of literature which was moving in the direction of the precepts and the practice of Henry James.

Thackeray had taken humour in another direction; in his work, reality was not transformed into wonderful and terrible configurations for our delight, but certainly uncomfortable psychological truths had been suggested by means of a complex series of ironic

stances which had also undermined the moral basis of Romantic humour. What George Eliot reasserted, against both Dickens and Thackeray, was the idea that man could be reconciled with man, but only by attending to the results of the confrontation with reality, out of which would come, optimistically, individual improvement and, hence, the slow moral progress of humanity as a whole. The working out of this vision led Eliot to abandon humour as a major imaginative dimension early on in her career. Reality, in all its awkward harshness, must be encountered and triumphed over, not cynically accommodated or transformed; and such encounters and triumphs would show that man was noble and self-aware, not selfish or deceived by egotistical mirages.

The attacks on Scott and Dickens which helped to prepare the way for the kind of novel created by Eliot and James complained of the superficiality of the characterisation employed by Scott and Dickens. F.D. Maurice and Carlyle compared Scott unfavourably with Shakespeare; in 1828, Maurice had complained that Scott 'has seen the outward, but he has not connected it with that which is within',¹ and the same conclusion was reached by Carlyle ten years later: 'your Shakespeare fashions his characters from the heart outwards; your Scott fashions them from the skin inwards, never getting near the heart

¹ 'Sketches of Contemporary Authors', Athenaeum, 11 March 1828, in Scott: The Critical Heritage, edited by John O. Hayden (1970), p. 310.

of them! The one set become living men and women; the other amount to little more than mechanical cases, deceptively painted automatons.' ²

In his youthful review of Our Mutual Friend, James paid Dickens the dubious compliment of describing him as 'the greatest of superficial novelists', adding that 'he has created nothing but figure. He has added nothing to our understanding of human character';³ and a more general target became the deplorable formlessness of those 'large loose baggy monsters'⁴ of Dickens, Thackeray, and Tolstoy, for which he wished to substitute an organically conceived work: 'A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts.' ⁵

Eliot, too, had attacked the superficial nature of Dickens's characterisation, pointing to the dangerous social tendencies of such idealisations; Dickens's 'preternaturally virtuous poor children and artisans, his melodramatic boatmen and courtezans'

² 'Sir Walter Scott' (1838), Works, vol. 29 (Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, vol. 4), p. 75.

³ 'Our Mutual Friend' (1865), Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism, edited by M. Shapira (1963), p. 9.

⁴ Preface to The Tragic Muse, (1890), The Novels and Tales of Henry James, New York Edition (1908), vol. 7, i, p. x.

⁵ 'The Art of Fiction' (1884), Henry James, edited by M. Shapira, p. 58.

will only encourage 'the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance and want; or that the working-classes are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of altruism, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and no one for himself'. This mistaken view is partly ameliorated, however, by humour which, though superficial in itself, in some measure restores a proper balance; Eliot refers to 'the precious salt of his humour, which compels him to reproduce external traits that serve, in some degree, as a corrective to his frequently false psychology',⁶

It was rather to the realism of Austen which Eliot, in part, turned for the encouragement of her own purposes. The novels of Austen provided useful ammunition against tendencies towards exaggeration of all kinds; and in his essay on Austen of 1859, G.H.Lewes presents her as the worthy forerunner of the author of Scenes of Clerical Life. The critic who can write of Austen that 'She is without grace or felicity of expression'⁷ clearly has his limitations; and in enlisting Austen into the cause of realism, Lewes does not succeed in preventing her from sounding dull. The various lures of the romantic, the exaggerated, and the eccentric are all contrasted with Austen's 'economy of art', and

⁶ 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), Essays of George Eliot, edited by Thomas Pinney (1963), pp. 271-2.

⁷ 'The Novels of Jane Austen', Blackwood's Magazine, vol. 86, July 1859, p. 109.

with her pre-eminent quality, the 'truthful representation of character';⁸ but her genius is shown to be limited, since 'the struggles, the ambitions, the errors, and the sins of energetic life are left untouched by her; and these form the subjects most stirring to the general sympathy'.⁹ These were to be the subjects which Eliot herself was to examine in her own fiction, and without the support of humour.

The limited place which humour had in fiction for Eliot can also be seen in her response to a novel which she read with admiration during the writing of Scenes of Clerical Life: Mrs Gaskell's Cranford. 'I was conscious', wrote Eliot to Mrs Gaskell, 'while the question of my power was still undecided for me, that my feeling towards Life and Art had some affinity with the feeling which had inspired Cranford and the earlier chapters of Mary Barton'.¹⁰

In Mrs Gaskell's novel of provincial life, the humour contributes to a predominant pathos, a mood which dominates Eliot's novel too. In Cranford, the pathos is appropriate, since the town is mainly inhabited by elderly ladies on whom the pressures of the past and familiarity with death are central

⁸ Ibid., p.102.

⁹ Ibid., p.106.

¹⁰ Letter of 11 Nov.1859, The George Eliot Letters, edited by Gordon S. Haight, vol.3 (1954), p.198.

factors. The social tone of the town is dictated by the spinsters and widows, and the guiding social principle lies in the tension between the poverty of the ladies (which is never mentioned), and their gentility (which is insisted on), in the forms of correct social behaviour, etiquette, and subtly oppressive class awareness, which give the society its claustrophobic atmosphere.

The book does have, however, a firmer plot-structure than do the novels of Galt discussed above, which it resembles. The main thread which emerges is the story of Miss Matty Jenkyns, whose dominating elder sister has, in effect, condemned her to a life of spinsterhood. Her double sorrow is the disappearance of her brother, who ran away from home when a young man, and the death, during the course of the novel, of her old flame, the eccentric Mr Holbrook, after a trip to Paris. Holbrook is one of the last of the amiable foible characters who go back to Addison's Sir Roger, as is the other male character of prominence in the novel, Captain Brown.

Holbrook's particular eccentricity, as the narrator, a youngish woman who visits Cranford regularly, learns on a visit to his house, is his habit of striding about his garden quoting poetry, particularly that of Tennyson; alarmingly, he questions Mary about the colour of the ash-buds in March:

'I am sure I don't know, sir', said I, with the meekness of ignorance.

'I knew you didn't. No more did I - an old fool that I am! till this young man comes and tells me. Black as ash-buds in March. And I've lived all my life in the country; more shame for me not to know. Black: they are jet-black, madam'. And he went off again, swinging along to the music of some rhyme he had got hold of. 11

The report of Holbrook's death affects Matty to the extent that she gives permission to Martha, her maid, to see her young man, Jem Hearn.

In the society of Cranford, Captain Brown, too, is an eccentric, since he talks about his poverty publicly in a shocking way. He is a figure of both humour and pathos; he recommends a flannel waistcoat and flannel drawers for Betty Barker's ailing cow, and has a comic confrontation with the elder Miss Jenkyns on the respective merits of Boz and Dr Johnson; and his pathos springs from his poverty, his invalid daughter, and his death, run over by a railway train while saving a little boy who had wandered on to the line. Because of the predominance of the pathetic mode in which they are sunk, Holbrook and Brown lack the vivid comic life of the great amiable foible characters; rather are they a transition between the amiable foible character and the whimsical version which became the stock-in-trade of light humour.

The foibles mainly celebrated are, however,

¹¹ Cranford (1853, Oxford English Novels, 1972), Ch.4, p.35.

female, undramatic, and social, in a closed society where everyone knows everyone else, and certain standards of behaviour are expected. The characters behave true to type even in times of excitement, when a conjuror visits the town, or when there are rumours of burglars in the area, or when the amazing news of the marriage of Lady Glenmire to Mr Hoggins is announced; in the handling of these incidents, there is the same kind of knowledge of the workings of a small-town community as Galt displays. Cranford ends with the double-climax of the return of Matty's brother Peter from India, and the consequences of her poverty as her bank collapses, finally reinforcing the mood of pathos. The episode of the collapse of the bank, and its aftermath, provides the most sustained humorous-pathetic episode in the book; at last Matty's positive goodness can find expression, and the triumph of her struggle with adverse circumstances is surely one of the main features of the book which impressed Eliot.

While shopping, she meets a working man whose money has been made worthless by the bank's collapse, so she gives him five sovereigns for his note, since she is one of the share-holders, so that he can buy his wife a shawl. She is rewarded for letting Martha see Jem in the comic scene when Martha, clearly the stronger partner, announces that she and Jem have decided to marry, and will take Matty as a lodger. Martha does the talking to begin with,

and she tries to excuse Jem's tongue-tied silence ('"...only, you see, he's dazed at being called on to speak before quality"'),¹² but after recovering his wits, Jem makes a dignified speech to Matty to end a scene in which, as in other incidents in the novel, the humour is not far from tears. Matty takes up tea-selling, and her commercial naiveté contrasts favourably with the hardness of the world, and may even improve it: 'It was really very pleasant to see how her unselfishness, and simple sense of justice, called out the same good qualities in others. She never seemed to think anyone would impose upon her, because she should be so grieved to do it to them.'¹³

2

The predominance of pathos is one feature which Cranford has in common with Scenes of Clerical Life. Another feature they share is the use of the past as a means of creating a mood of nostalgia. Eliot places the action of her stories a generation or more before the writing of the book. The more relaxed and simpler past is evoked in the picture of Milby, now a 'refined, moral, and enlightened town',¹⁴ but a quarter of a century ago lacking the improvement of the railway; and in the nearby parish, Mr Gilfil mixed freely with his parishioners, and kept his

¹² Ibid., Ch.14, p.133.

¹³ Ibid., Ch.15, p.145.

¹⁴ Scenes of Clerical Life (1858, Everyman Edition, 1910), Janet's Repentance, Ch.2, p.188.

sermons short. Through this perspective of time, the nature of the slow social changes which affect the lives of the characters can be grasped; an awareness of these changes contributes to the feeling of sympathy which the reader is required to feel for the people of these provincial towns. Like most of us, these people are ordinary; the Reverend Amos Barton is 'very far from remarkable.. palpably and unmistakably commonplace',¹⁵ as most of us are. Eliot, in resisting the distortions of 'remarkable novels, full of striking situations, thrilling incidents, and eloquent writing',¹⁶ maintains that her object is 'to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles - to win your tears for real sorrow: sorrow such as may live next door to you - such as walks neither in rags nor in velvet, but in very ordinary decent apparel'.¹⁷

Of the three stories in the collection, the most humorous is the first one, The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton. The humour partly springs from Eliot's use of the characters as choric commentators on the action, a device which is used again in the last story, Janet's Repentance. In the discussion between Mrs Patten, Mr and Mrs Hackit, and Mr Pilgrim, when the talk turns to the character of the new parson, we learn about styles of preaching as

¹⁵ Ibid., Amos Barton, Ch.5, pp.36-7.

¹⁶ Ibid., Amos Barton, Ch.5, p.37.

¹⁷ Ibid., Amos Barton, Ch.7, p.52.

indicating the kinds of changes which are going on in the town:

'Rather a low-bred fellow, I think, Barton', said Mr Pilgrim, who hated the Reverend Amos for two reasons - because he had called in a new doctor, recently settled in Shepperton; and because, being himself a dabbler in drugs, he had the credit of having cured a patient of Mr Pilgrim's. 'They say his father was a dissenting shoemaker; and he's half a dissenter himself. Why, doesn't he preach extempore in that cottage up here, of a Sunday evening?'

'Tchaw!' - this was Mr Hackit's favourite interjection - 'that preaching without book's no good, only when a man has a gift, and has the Bible at his fingers' ends. It was all very well for Parry - he'd a gift; and in my youth I've heard the Ranters out o' doors in Yorkshire go on for an hour or two on end, without ever sticking fast a minute. There was one clever chap, I remember, as used to say, "You're like the woodpigeon; it says do, do, do, all day, and never sets about any work itself." That's bringing it home to people. But our parson's no gift at all that way; he can preach as good a sermon as need be heard when he writes it down. But when he tries to preach wi'out book, he rambles about, and doesn't stick to's text; and every now and then he flounders about like a sheep as has cast itself, and can't get on'ts legs again. You wouldn't like that, Mrs Patten, if you was to go to church now?'. 18

The function of such humour is not to celebrate individual idiosyncrasy, nor to present the kind of balance between the individual character and the social context achieved in Galt's histories of Scottish society; its function is to promote a vision of society, by indicating how such people in this

¹⁸ Ibid., Amos Barton, Ch.1, p.7.

society thought and felt at that time; and for Eliot, humour tends to illuminate a more primitive social stage than the present one, as a half-mocking, half-affectionate indication of a previous social state. This is the function of the humour of the opening of Janet's Repentance, as Dempster pontificates at the bar:

'The Presbyterians,' said Mr Dempster, in rather a louder tone than before, holding that every appeal for information must naturally be addressed to him, 'are a sect founded in the reign of Charles I., by a man named John Presbyter, who hatched all the brood of dissenting vermin that crawl about in dirty alleys, and circumvent the lord of the manor in order to get a few yards of ground for their pigeon-house conventicles.'

'No, no, Dempster,' said Mr Luke Byles, 'you're out there. Presbyterianism is derived from the word presbyter, meaning an elder.'

'Don't contradict me, sir!' stormed Dempster. 'I say the word presbyterian is derived from John Presbyter, a miserable fanatic who wore a suit of leather, and went about from town to village, and from village to hamlet, inoculating the vulgar with the asinine virus of dissent.'

'Come, Byles, that seems a deal more liker,' said Mr Tomlinson, in a conciliatory tone, apparently of opinion that history was a process of ingenious guessing.

'It's not a question of likelihood; it's a known fact. I could fetch you my Encyclopaedia, and show it you this moment.'

'I don't care a straw, sir, either for you or your Encyclopaedia,' said Mr Dempster; 'a farrago of false information, of which you picked up an imperfect copy in a cargo of waste paper. Will you tell me, sir, that I don't know the origin of Presbyterianism? I, sir, a man known through the county, intrusted with the affairs of half a score parishes; while you, sir, are are ignored by the very fleas that infest the miserable alley in which you were bred.' 19

¹⁹ Ibid., Janet's Repentance, Ch. 1, pp. 184-5.

In the humorous treatment of Amos Barton's failure to preach a sermon of any effectiveness to the senile and idiot inhabitants of the workhouse, Eliot shows the influence of the weaker side of Dickens's humorous writing in the recourse to embarrassing circumlocutions which betray the same patronising nervousness as parts of Sketches by Boz:

For, to have any chance of success, short of miraculous invention, (Amos) must bring his geographical, chronological, exegetical mind pretty nearly to the pauper point of view, or of no view; he must have some approximate conception of the mode in which the doctrines that have so much vitality in the plenum of his own brain will comport themselves in vacuo - that is to say, in a brain that is neither geographical, chronological, nor exegetical. It is a flexible imagination that can take such a leap as that, and an adroit tongue that can adapt its speech to so unfamiliar a position. The Rev. Amos Barton had neither that flexible imagination, nor that adroit tongue. 20

But the purpose of the scene, unlike its purpose in a Dickensian treatment, is not to illustrate the grotesque nature of the paupers, or to bring out the ridiculous nature of the enterprise; rather the humour reinforces the sympathy we should feel for the clumsy, yet touching, efforts which the unattractive Barton is making to bring the Gospel's message to the paupers; Barton is seen, not as an amusing amiable foible, but as a type of the struggling human being which we ourselves also are. In its search for affinities, humour reminds us of

²⁰ Ibid., Amos Barton, Ch.2, p.21.

our common humanity, and is subordinated to the overall didactic intention which Eliot described as 'the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings...that those who read them should be better able to imagine and ^{to}/feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures.'²¹

In the second story, Mr Gilfil's Love-Story, humour acts as a frame for the main story; once again, it plays a minor part in the social analysis of the relationship between the vicar and his parishioners more than thirty years previously. The reactions of Mrs Patten and Mrs Hackit to the sermons of the vicar humorously illuminate the ways in which the social effects of religion manifest themselves in a certain kind of rural community:

Mrs Patten understood that if she turned out ill-crushed cheeses, a just retribution awaited her; though, I fear, she made no particular application of the sermon on backbiting. Mrs Hackit expressed herself greatly edified by the sermon on honesty, the allusion to the unjust weight and deceitful balance having a peculiar lucidity for her, owing to a recent dispute with her grocer; but I am not aware that she ever appeared to be much struck by the sermon on anger. 22

The analysis of the state of religion in the Milby of a generation ago in Janet's Repentance has

²¹ Letter of 5 July 1859 to Charles Bray, Letters, vol. 3, p. 111.

²² Scenes of Clerical Life: Mr Gilfil's Love Story, Ch. 1, pp. 75-6.

Dickensian elements, in the contrast between the young people's attention to costume and their frivolous behaviour during the sermon; but Eliot refuses to follow Boz down the road of easy humour at the expense of the unmarried clergyman and young ladies: 'Poor women's hearts! Heaven forbid that I should laugh at you, and make cheap jests on your susceptibility towards the clerical sex, as if it had nothing deeper or more lovely in it than the mere vulgar angling for a husband'.²³

Nevertheless, there is something of Dickens's feeling for the ludicrous in the account of the turnover of dissenting ministers; and the limitation of Eliot's humorous range: its tendency towards condescending patronage as it records the manners of a previous time, here sharply rendered in the comparison (also suggested by Dempster himself), between the Methodists and insects: is revealed in this passage:

Even the Dissent in Milby was then of a lax and indifferent kind. The doctrine of adult baptism, struggling under a heavy load of debt, had let off half its chapel area as a ribbon-shop; and Methodism was only to be detected, as you detect curious larvae, by diligent search in dirty corners...Salem belied its name, and was not always the abode of peace. For some reason or other, it was unfortunate in the choice of its ministers. The Rev. Mr Horner, elected with brilliant hopes, was discovered to be given to tippling and quarrelling with his wife; the Rev. Mr Rose's doctrine was a little too 'high'.

²³ Ibid., Janet's Repentance, Ch. 3, pp. 208-9.

verging on antinomianism; the Rev. Mr Stickney's gift as a preacher was found to be less striking on a more extended acquaintance; and the Rev. Mr Smith, a distinguished minister much sought after in the iron districts, with a talent for poetry, became objectionable from an inclination to exchange verses with the young ladies of his congregation. It was reasonably argued that such verses as Mr Smith's must take a long time for their composition, and the habit alluded to might intrench seriously on his pastoral duties. 24

The larvae image also indicates Eliot's view of the kind of society she was describing, and the relationship of the individual to that society, a view which humour, as seen in this discussion, cannot centrally contribute to. In the humorous view, there is a basic conflict between the individual and society, either of a Quixotic kind, in which the humorous character suggests a higher morality than that of the world, or of a Falstaffian kind, in which the world is transformed by the power of the humorous vision. As seen by Eliot, the relationship of the individual and society is quite different from the kind of view which humour could illuminate. In Eliot's world, there must be a necessary adjustment between the self and society, often involving renunciation of selfish passions, which is part of the process by which society, as a whole, improves. There is, in this view, no room for the rampant egoism of a Quilp or a Micawber, as society is seen improving itself through the process of the generations; Tom and Maggie Tulliver are seen

²⁴ Ibid., Ch.2, pp.193-4.

as types of 'young natures in many generations'
which

in the onward tendency of human things have
risen above the mental level of the generation
before them, to which they have been
nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres
of their hearts...does not science tell us
that its highest striving is after the
ascertainment of a unity which shall bind
the smallest things with the greatest?
In natural science, I have understood, there
is nothing petty to the mind which has a large
vision of relations, and to which every single
object suggests a vast sum of conditions. It
is surely the same with the observation of
human life. 25

Humour's greatest strength, its loving depiction
of individual idiosyncrasy, must have, in such a view
of reality, a very limited part to play. It tends,
in Eliot, to illuminate typicality, by exhibiting
the kind of choric conversations of Amos Barton and
Janet's Repentance as specimens of social manners;
or by indicating, as in the larvae image, the
primitive state of past society; or by embarking on
weighty excursions into comparative sociology, in
which the humorous character tends to be monumentally
embalmed, his individuality sunk into the kind of
representativeness which is the main object of the
rumination; Mr Glegg, for example, represents 'This
inalienable habit of saving, as an end in itself,
(which) belonged to the industrious men of business
of a former generation, who made their fortunes
slowly, almost as the tracking of the fox belongs
to the harrier - it constituted them a 'race', which

²⁵ The Mill on the Floss (1860, Everyman Edition, 1908),
Book 4, Ch. 1, pp. 254-5.

is nearly lost in these days of rapid money-getting, when lavishness comes close on the back of want'.²⁶

Here the image from natural science supports a pervasive nostalgia, rather than suggesting a primitive state from which progress is inevitable; but the humour in each case is subordinated to the same positivist aim. This vision, of slow, steady improvement is, of course, another kind of idealisation of reality; but it is not the kind of idealisation to which humour could contribute. Humour, with its tendency to fasten on the eccentric, the peculiar, and even the frenzied in behaviour, and to create a world of wonder and delight out of the everyday, was not a means by which that struggle with the everyday which led society forward could be described.

3

After about 1850, humour lost the impetus which had been built up since the beginning of the century. The Romantic imperatives which had guided its progress culminated in the early novels of Dickens; and in the novels of Eliot, humour plays only a subordinate part. Humorous writing developed after 1850 in fragmentary ways, in which any continuities with the past, such as Meredith's development of the Austenian comedy of manners, or Wells's sub-Dickensian lower-class comic characterisations, are short-lived and minor

²⁶ Ibid., Book 1, Ch. 12, pp. 111-2.

developments. Light humour continued to develop in such whimsical works as Three Men in a Boat and The Diary of a Nobody; and the only genuinely new humorous mode, that of nonsense humour, was almost totally confined to its inventors, Edward Lear, and a greater writer, Lewis Carroll.

In the late 1870s, Meredith expounded a theory of comedy, in 'An Essay on Comedy', which took further some of Austen's assumptions about comedy. Meredith argued that a society of upperclass men and women was the social basis of comedy, and that there must exist a basis of intellectual equality between the sexes. It was through the processes of exchanges between the sexes that there came about that thoughtful laughter by which social affectations were corrected. Laughter, for Meredith, was a corrective, but a kindly one; separate from the harsh laughter produced by satire and the sympathetic laughter produced by humour, the pleasure to be derived from wit was cerebral, the humour of the mind. Although the greatest humorists of all were Shakespeare and Cervantes, since they fused tragedy and comedy, the greatest comic writers, apart from these, were Aristophanes and Molière; in particular, the latter's The Misanthrope was praised; and Meredith will only allow merit to The Way of the World among Restoration comedies, since the rest are coarsely realistic. This essay, and the novel written to illustrate its principles, The Egoist,

are the final stage in the development of the comedy of manners, as their mannered style suggests.

More robust, but completely derivative, are the Cockney ^{ac}characterisations of Wells, exhibited in the Dickensian humour of Mr Polly and Tono-Bungay.

Here the humour combines with a sociological impulse in fastening on the down-trodden lower-class drapers' assistants and clerks seeking relief from their grey, monotonous worlds, only to find themselves trapped, in middle-age, in a disastrous marriage. Mr Polly's escape is a fantasy of appealing power and felicity, since it leads to the appearance of Uncle Jim, perhaps Wells's greatest comic character. In a Dickensian manner, Uncle Jim, whose original function was to illustrate the evils of reformatory institutions which only encourage further crime, acquires a monstrous, menacing status, as the main impediment to Mr Polly's new life of careless bliss; and the scenes in which he appears, usually episodes of the utmost violence, have an authentic Dickensian relish. The Dickensian mode has persisted to our own day, emerging as a powerful presence in the novels of such writers as Evelyn Waugh and Angus Wilson.

It was, however, in the novels of Dickens himself that, for the last time in our literature, humour could be a medium through which reality could be totally apprehended; here humour is both a culminating

point, and a point from which decline and fragmentation began. In Dickens, all the cultural possibilities of Romantic humour were realised; and after him, such a complex synthesis was no longer possible.

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The place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated.

The following abbreviations have been used:

OEN for Oxford English Novels

PMLA for Publications of the Modern Language
Association of America.

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